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LVCI121  
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202LEND1  
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## *SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY*

### *Synopsis*

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



by: [nekosattva](#)

2'  
LUCIGI21  
OET  
FUCS2  
VCCSM20W  
HRECEMV  
HRECEMV  
E102MOB  
2EI DO  
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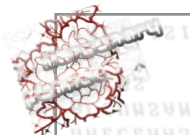


### *Last Time*

the armies and civilians of the glass city reveal their ideologies, their histories and more important to Yelena, the fate of Christine

swords under the phosphor sky will return





by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

MERCENARY PLANET

Name: VAKHA BASHTAEV

Theme song: Arvo Pärt - Orient & Occident

Likes: manuls, Russian naive art, Platonic friendships with foreign e-girls, sacred minimalism, ashiq, ice hockey

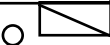

Dislikes: mafiya aesthetics, caracals, video games, Eurovision, stock trading, Reddit OSINT



POI datafile

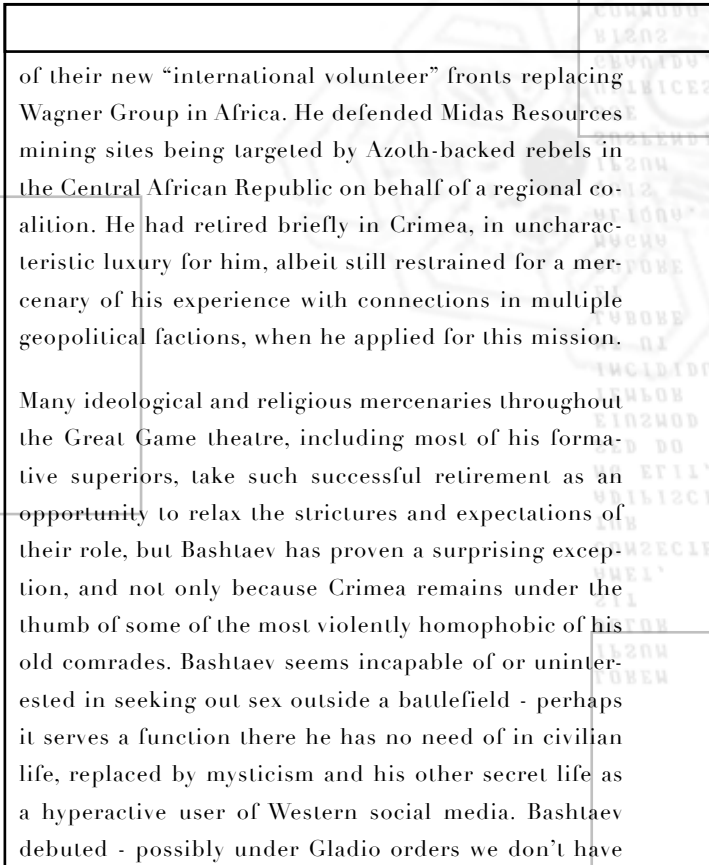

The annoying Gladio B guy keeps getting his picks filtered by Lillywhite and got all the way down to this one. He only fought with them for two years when he should have been in high school but could help us meet the Russian quota. But heads up, this is another weird one. The origin alone should be a red flag - at one point, the same cell was running both a köçek ring that compromised a number of high-profile Georgian and Chechen politicians, and a jihadist group that targeted them. BashtaeV joined the latter at 15. There's not enough documentation of the former left to say if there was any con-






nection on that end, but it wouldn't be the first time it happened even in that specific cell.

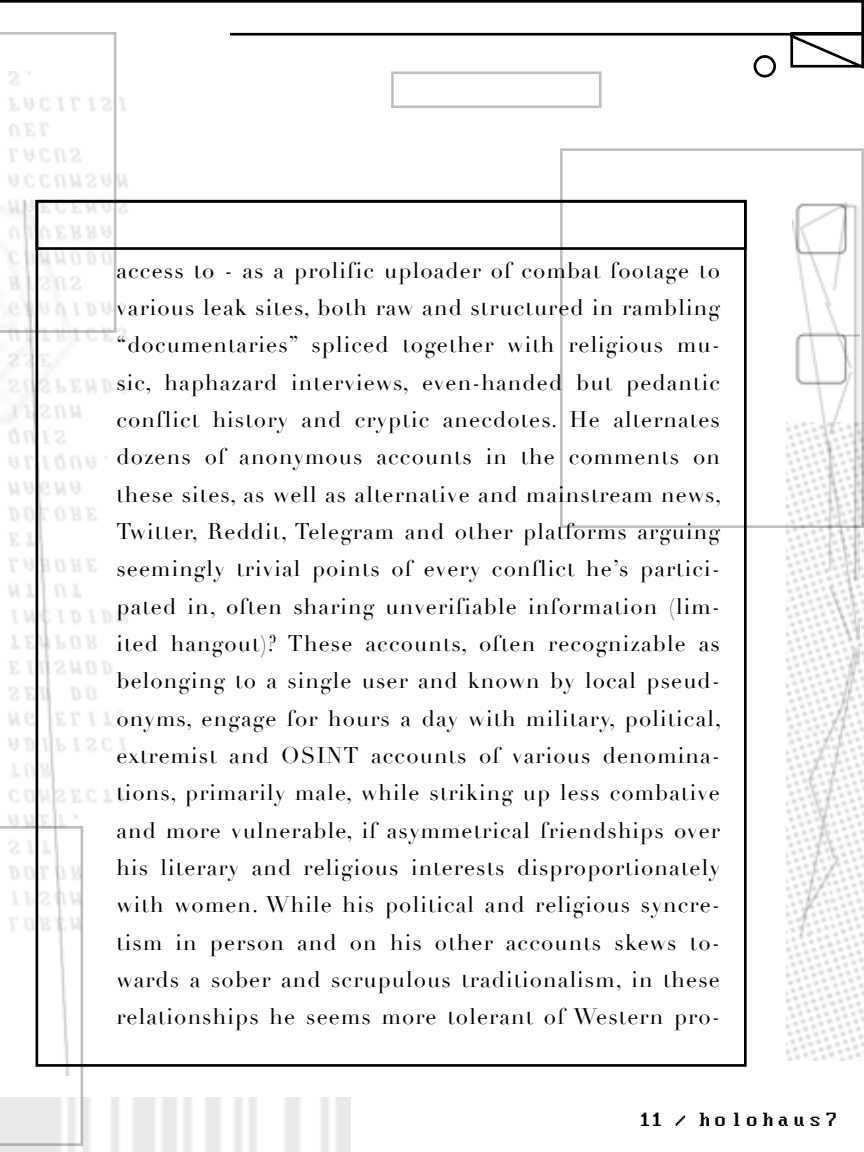
Like Hadak, he's fought on a lot of sides, sometimes at the same time, but he's not the kind of combat freak who doesn't want to live any other way. It's more like he keeps trying. Again, he only fought with them for two years, and was pardoned by Kadyrov with a couple of the younger members in exchange for some higher profile targets. He served with Kadyrov's own forces from 18 to 20, not in a combat role, then returned to civilian life and apprenticed as an electrician, but was tapped by a remnant of his old network for the Sheikh Mansur Battalion just before getting his certification. After fighting for most of a decade up to the treaty, he settled down in the ruins of Bakhmut, working with a number of volunteer medical and construction corps and attempting to open a bookstore before being apparently coerced by the local pro-Russian militias into joining one



of their new “international volunteer” fronts replacing Wagner Group in Africa. He defended Midas Resources mining sites being targeted by Azoth-backed rebels in the Central African Republic on behalf of a regional coalition. He had retired briefly in Crimea, in uncharacteristic luxury for him, albeit still restrained for a mercenary of his experience with connections in multiple geopolitical factions, when he applied for this mission.



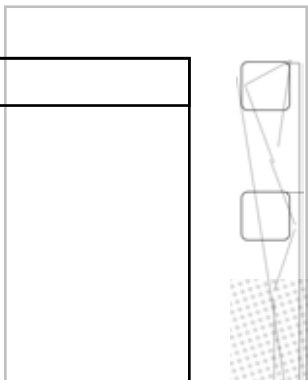
Many ideological and religious mercenaries throughout the Great Game theatre, including most of his formative superiors, take such successful retirement as an opportunity to relax the strictures and expectations of their role, but Bashtaev has proven a surprising exception, and not only because Crimea remains under the thumb of some of the most violently homophobic of his old comrades. Bashtaev seems incapable of or uninterested in seeking out sex outside a battlefield - perhaps it serves a function there he has no need of in civilian life, replaced by mysticism and his other secret life as a hyperactive user of Western social media. Bashtaev debuted - possibly under Gladio orders we don't have

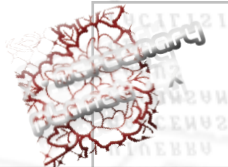


access to - as a prolific uploader of combat footage to various leak sites, both raw and structured in rambling “documentaries” spliced together with religious music, haphazard interviews, even-handed but pedantic conflict history and cryptic anecdotes. He alternates dozens of anonymous accounts in the comments on these sites, as well as alternative and mainstream news, Twitter, Reddit, Telegram and other platforms arguing seemingly trivial points of every conflict he’s participated in, often sharing unverifiable information (limited hangout)? These accounts, often recognizable as belonging to a single user and known by local pseudonyms, engage for hours a day with military, political, extremist and OSINT accounts of various denominations, primarily male, while striking up less combative and more vulnerable, if asymmetrical friendships over his literary and religious interests disproportionately with women. While his political and religious syncretism in person and on his other accounts skews towards a sober and scrupulous traditionalism, in these relationships he seems more tolerant of Western pro-

gressive and even radical ideas. Of interest: for the last two years Bashtaev has been one of the highest-paying supporters (his tier gives him access to a one-on-one encrypted communication channel, usage unknown) of a femdom and esoterica influencer, Amaterasu Draconis, who is one of the five known members of the current Domnu. UPDATE: On reviewing the “Of Interest” section added to this file Waldo Beek immediately approved Bashtaev’s recruitment, quoted “Oh hell yes. Let’s throw them in with [POI Lillywhite, pejorative] and see what happens.”

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FUCS2  
VCCSM2SM  
WCCS2SM  
AERBBV  
CMMOBO  
A 202  
EVAIDV'  
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2'2LENDI  
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## *Synopsis*

clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.



## *Last Time*

arriving on Towers, Leona is caught up on the strategic situation on the porous planet and the nature of the Adipose war, while new divisions emerge within the expeditionary force and a scouting party makes contact



CW: implied sex work, guns, mass shooting, Islamophobia, Central Asian conflict, homophobia, conspiracy theory, self-punishment, eye horror, body horror, drugs (fictional, cocaine), colonial power dynamics, AGI, voluntary mind sharing, involuntary memory sharing, knives, finger horror, severe injury, gay sex, murder, implied sexual violence, trans death, car accident, Israel

I had woken up just like that to the news that Delilah was gone, as if born by mistake into some wrong world. I'd had my phone turned off at a basement show Mai was playing, under my cheek on somebody's third or fourth mattress, missing the texts that had raced circles around all our friends as if trying to outrun her.

Delilah, being beautiful as she was, had a job no one had even heard of a trans woman having in this city - waitress at a high class restaurant that wasn't even overtly sexual, or queer, or themed. She would wear this tight platinum sequined mini-dress, modest triangular neckline and slit

## ***CATHARSIS & RETRIBUTION***

REF  
TVCN2  
VCCN20M  
MVECEM2  
NIGENBU  
COMMOD  
N1202  
CBVOTDU  
N11VICE2  
SSE  
S2SLENDI  
12204  
0012  
M11000  
MVENU  
D0FORE  
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TMC1D100  
TENFOR  
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S2S DO  
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D0FOR  
12204  
T0REN









11:45, an hour after she usually got home. Sophie sent her a message. *where are u.*

A grainy screenshot of a dashboard, light streaming over it too fast to make sense of where anything was, like melt-water down furrows in spring.

*Have you made the magical girl contract.* That, as Sophie explained in her first dazed repetitive thread, was their code for if she was being trafficked.

*no*

In the next shot, you could see lace-gloved fingers on the wheel, and the rearing horse of the Ferrari logo in its centre.

*no*

*delet this after*

*but first*

*Guess~*

They had a number of quiz games training each other in each other's special interests - usually updated regularly





online, at least in their Discord server. Guess the astrological sign, the 2000s shoujo manga, the Kpop unit, the Saint's Feast Day, the exotic car.

The gloves were a gift Sophie had ordered on Etsy for a local goth band's music video. No-one but Sophie had seen them, or knew Delilah owned them.

Sophie had never been good at this one. Not willing to play along, she had posted it in the main channel of the Discord server, with the message:

*help*

*idk if delilas alreight*

(She had taken a rose out of the cabinet, as she had told Delilah not to let her, and figured Delilah being late made an honourable exception.)

F355 and I'm not getting any reverse image search results. nani tf? one of Delilah's /o/ friends, now an Azoth affiliated podcaster, replied within 5 minutes.

who u with? can u call?

Silence. The actual thing that was happening was so out of the blue or so hard that Sophie couldn't wrap her





head around it until someone posted “Street Racing OSINT” mentioning an Ferrari F355 on the I-35 almost an hour ago.

Delilah had of course deleted location metadata from the photos, she wasn't stupid; Sophie was torn between proving the script she used to pull GPS metadata from the messages themselves - *don't call me abusive rite now read the room I never used it until this & this was exactly the kind of thing I was scared of enuf to have it!* - even existed and incriminating herself, but she demonstrated it to the satisfaction of skeptics in the comments. She said she had bought it off a darkweb vendor when that one ex was stalking her. Delilah was already out on the edge of the woods, racing along Lowell Larimer Road, which Sophie referred to from some experience as *her own personal Mulholland Highway*.

Sophie texted saying to meet her at the Paradise Valley Conservation Area entrance with the geocache. She got a ride in the server from Andrea Histamine, who said she didn't know and wasn't told what was happening, despite Sophie claiming she could have pieced it together from the available info in the main room. Her understanding was that Delilah had gone home with some guy and got-





ten stranded after a fight. The “stranded” part was pure fabrication, either on Sophie’s or Andrea’s part. That someone was letting her drive their car, however, was the default assumption in the server. No one was paying attention to the police blotter.

Anashirana had requested a shipment of weapons to analyze. We’d sent three grunts with a Weir pilot on one of the vehicles carrying a number of the classic Edison Lens heavy armament, the FN P90; the updated replacement that had been ordered as soon as Azoth had started reaching out to governments, the Scar-L; the rifle the IIEF itself had offered instead, the Remington ACR; and our pistols, Edison Lens’ FNX-45 and the IIEF’s Beretta PX4, plus the trusty AKs a number of mercenary groups had been allowed to bring along. Among them was Vakha Bashtaev, a name I knew from Jax scouting him as an informant on Hadak. A Chechen mercenary who had fought with both Western and Russian-aligned factions in Ukraine and in Africa, where he had crossed swords (not sure which kind) with Hadak and become one of his “enemy contacts”. From one of the most homophobic and geopolitically isolated military cultures in the world,





there was probably no way he could have imagined bot-  
toming for dozens of men in a diverse international coali-  
tion *short* of alien contact - a miracle for him as much as  
for me. He had thrown himself into the nudist uprising  
wearing a sort of kilt made of chains from the EV toolkit,  
but refused to be part of any "sacred band" led by Hadak,  
and seemed to want some sort of protection from him Jax  
thought Rho Aias could provide.

That was the Vakha Bashtaev we knew. The Bashtaev the  
ship's gay underground (as opposed to its gay abo-  
veground - these were very different groups, almost  
hostile to each other - Hadak had more sway in the for-  
mer) knew was a sort of stoic courtesan who would enjoy  
anything with an artist's or ascetic's (or even penitent's)  
indifference. To the minds of the rest of the ship Bash-  
taev might as well have been a Tatar mercenary out of a  
19th century romance, who responded to the Meteoro-  
logical first guest's greeting with a solemn bow before  
whispering "inna alladhina kafaru sawaon alayhim, a-and-  
hartahum am lam tundhir'hum la yu'minuna" ("Verily,  
those who disbelieve, it is the same to them whether you  
warn them or do not warn them, they will not believe")  
and spraying into the Playscape tunnel. Waldo Beek was  
already guffawing about the first Islamic terror attack



in space. It took a dozen bullets to crack enough of the Ahasurunu's claylike shell of hardened tissue layers for antifreeze-blue vascular fluid to start leaking out both sides and the jets of the disk which clogged and pitched as they crashed to the floor and lay there, half-singing, rolling jerkily to one side and the other, for five to twelve minutes while the remaining soldiers split, one to go after them and the other to get medical help. They had taken one of the other Ahasurunu attending the hostage, riding their disc down one of the side-corridors of the Playscape which seemed to require some sort of special clearance to follow. So one ended up looking for "first aid", which we had the wrong word for, and one for the symbol on the side of the vascular tunnel. By the time they found their respective objects, Anashirana was dead and Bashtaev untraceable.

Nobody else had died, at least. The Adipose node was under lockdown, although as far as I knew Bashtaev had no reason to believe it existed, and hadn't been trained in enough Ahasurunu to find out. But the high-security network (the Playscape consisted of several different tunnel networks with different security settings) connected to it. They wanted to know how to defend against guns, short of being given them, which they weren't willing to





try again. The whole negotiation was conducted by Weir and his mediators across the membrane - no one wanted to let us in again, at least until Bashtaev was caught.

I'd called up Hadak to an unused suite and locked him in, tried at first to trip him into letting slip he knew what had happened before telling him. He genuinely seemed surprised, and when I told him the way his face changed couldn't have been acting.

"My own information doesn't suggest Bashtaev was ever actually a fundamentalist, certainly not by the time he got here. I'm not sure he was even still Muslim - he cut his beard in the first two weeks." He still cited Quranic verses (like that one) in conversation, along with the Bible and... Gurdjieff? He had hinted at Idries Shah's belief that some perennial form of Sufism predated Islam itself. But he was easy with the sometimes aggressively atheist Jax - easy with just about everyone, in bed or out. He didn't seem to make connections between the different parts of his life - he could invite you into his bedroom to pray, or to make love, and if one wouldn't mention the other.

"He fought alongside plenty of them." Hadak shrugged.





“Yes, and multiple kinds of Orthodox, Nazi pagans, African Evangelicals. I know Waldo Beek would look past all that and believe it was all just taqiyya or something, you on the other hand would know better... *how much* better, you see, is what I’m wondering.”

“Who knows how many lines that Gladio B *skraeling* is behind? Not me, not Waldo Beek and probably not him either. Assume it doesn’t matter.”

“Gladio B?” I hadn’t heard *that* name in a long time - but of course, it would make sense. My heart sank as Halation scanned my memory of old videos I hadn’t been sure how seriously to take about cells of astroturf “Islamists” activated by NATO as stay-behind forces throughout the former Soviet sphere of influence, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, Turkey, pawns in the New Great Game... It had felt a bit like one of those truther-left stories that sounded too much like War on Terror chain letters even as it blamed us instead of them. But that was my opinion as a sociologist who had never seen combat. And of course if it existed it would be here.





“Feeling out of your depth yet?” He threw his head back. “If you want this resolved cleanly and quickly without a lot of coverup kudzu - *let me in after him.*”

“No way in hell.”

“Fair, I can’t pretend it’s a good option. You won’t be having many. Let me know when you’re willing to try the crazy one.”

In fact I’d already promised the other crazy one - *on my word as their first guest*, an Ahasurunu custom older than Meteorology they’d brought to their first hosts in space along with it - and they’d said they would contact me as soon as they located him. I took a small capsule that would allow them to transmit harmonic resonances directly into my bloodstream, which I didn’t know if I would be able to pick up on but Halation assured me she would.

Morning approached. I would have less than six hours before I was supposed to greet the delegation from the Towers, and I spent a couple of them drawing up plans for an evacuation from the Lung itself into the surrounding tunnels.





*A takeover from inside wouldn't be hard either, Beek textured. Edison Lens' engineering team has already finished blueprinting the airbikes, all you'd need to do is inject them into that manufacturing structure they showed us a few days ago. The structure looked like a giant cell organelle - a pentagonal spiral of plum-coloured tubing connecting cylindrical material tanks, extruding impossibly complex forms from a sphincter at the end, floating languidly on its side on a cloud of carbon soot it produced as exhaust (processed by a dozen smaller things that looked like snail-shells).*

*We still have a chance to prove our value here - we have to figure out the source of the bombardment as fast as possible.*

I lay down to let grief drain through my body, but my dreams were grey and dense like diagrams.

At least the regular chain of command seemed to be working. There were five anti-Islamic breaches of discipline while I was asleep - one involving a member of the Sacred Band, the rest just American or Israeli meatheads. All were promptly tamped down without resistance by their immediate superiors.





The Lung had an official “dock” for interactions with the allied Towers, although they hadn’t had any for most of an orbit cycle. The main “tribe” in this plug had migrated deeper to escape the aerial attacks. No one else had passed through until the fungal bombings. A semi-permeable colon extended about two hundred metres from the Weirs’ lobe into a wide boulevard of a tunnel. It had a customizable atmosphere, which we kept to the natural setting of Towers. It was lit by rows lotus-shaped fungal lights in black light, which made our uniforms look dope as hell and apparently did the same for the ceremonial dress of the Towers. It also was connected to a stable of local animals the Weirs used to interact in the outside environment, which looked almost like rubbery hedgehogs with trunks and a triangular body plan.

Jax was with me, and Caroline. (Waldo Beek holding down the fort.) Hadak and the members of the scouting party they had injured were there by their request. Jax juggled back and forth in his palm a crystalline sphere in which a swirl of multicoloured metallic flecks were taking shape into a strange attractor. This strange object, supposedly linked to one of their own by naturally occurring quantum-entangled ions, was an ancient timekeeping token they’d had to return to in the absence of the network



to make synchronous arrangements in the tunnels where there were few signs of time. Details of the meeting also scrolled across its surface in a complex logography of anthills of tiny dots. He kept showing it to Caroline, who was the only person who understood the mathematical structure enough to say if the pattern was completed. “Hmmm, that should be about maximally symmetrical, unless” - and immediately a sucking noise announced a shape pressing in at the end of the membrane. I shivered watching the goldenrod barrier stretch and fall away from their thick grey-white-yellow keratin surface, the elaborate weave patterns of the wraps around their limbs shimmering.

The first to enter - I wasn't going to just assume *leader*, but it seemed a pretty safe bet - carried a staff of grey metal, with a split top like a tuning fork and an impression of incredibly precise shape and balance like a scientific instrument. From the preliminary info we'd been given, these staves had an incredible array of both ceremonial and practical uses, translating mathematically precise measurements of vibrations miles through the crust into inaudible overtones, chipping away at encrustations with its slotted tip, geometrical dance-forms consecrating the dozens of different categories of





temporary settlement. For the first meeting with a new species, they just handed it to me, and it took minutes of painstaking translating to establish that I was supposed to just do *something* off the top of my head that would become the basis for a greeting ritual with humans in general. After freezing for a few seconds that felt like an hour, I dipped my neck between the two prongs and found it fit like a guillotine pillory. Handing it back, they did the same, and at Halation's suggestion, we modified the formula to do the same for each other. I was going to have to add a guideline requiring gloves for this greeting, because I was extremely self-conscious of leaving oily fingerprints on the pristine metal, although Halation had covered my hands with an imperceptible layer.

After offloading their initial gifts - including portable chemical synthesis and gene editing kits that looked a lot more mission-ready and easily reproducible than the Weirs' "molecular substitution" tech - they had asked where the human with the patterned skin had gone, whether there were others like him and whether they were all strong like that.

Hadak's hands were ziptied, partly in a gesture of reciprocity with what he had done to one of them. I could



see, near the back of the group which had swelled to a solid dozen and a half (their whole travelling band, now spread throughout the plug, numbered almost a hundred twenty and was the third of twelve delegations following the same route), one whose fingers hung differently, like a limp set of streamers.

This one stepped forward, and the leader held their hand up. *We have injured each other mistakenly. All injured parties may now stand before the group* (all of their categories could be subsumed under something like “group”, and almost none have any component of biological family association, so I think I’ll use that instead of tribe, although Halation wants to come up with a super-specific plural like humans have for animals - a Fall of Towers?) *and present their injuries to be matched by those who dealt them.*

“...matched?”

*The parties on both sides who injured each other will deal to themselves, or have dealt to them by members of their group, the same injuries they inflicted on members of the other group.*

I blinked, and had to check with the other Weirs because Halation didn’t know enough about Towers to ensure I was understanding the custom correctly - *how does that*





even work for species with different body plans? while knowing it didn't matter because ours were close enough in any case for Fingal Hadak to grin, step forward, and ask for his ziptie to be removed.

"We... don't do that."

Hadak laughed. The leader lowered their head. *We understand that many may find this custom harsh, but the violence we have endured including from those who have called themselves allies is harsher. We cannot deal with groups who do not observe these laws of conflict, who will not at least observe them with us as a sign of good faith. Unless you mean that you do not regret your injuries to us, in which case we can enter a state of truce or war, but not full communication as we had hoped.*

I still wasn't sure we needed to take the risk of unzipping Hadak's hands, I was trying to think of the best way, maybe laying them out across something, a heavy chop with the butt of a gun. But one guard nodded to me with a gun in his back and barely loosened the ziptie before he grabbed his right hand with his left (he was left-handed, I remembered in a split second from his file), simply pulled back from the knuckles, snapping the metacarpals. His eyes were fixed on mine and I knew he was testing if





I would flinch. I tried to ignore the sound and focus on his face, a geological upheaval I had never seen before, tattoo lines writhing in hissing silence.

The Towers let out a long, dissonant trill, higher than any of the sounds that made up their everyday language, disintegrating into the ripple of a thousand cicadas. Hadak freed his wrists from the ziptie and raised his arms.

Then the crowd parted and one of their number stepped forward. They spoke. *If I understand you visitors' anatomy correctly, I shot someone's eye. I do not have a recording or a name, but if this injury was indeed dealt I will happily match it. Is the visitor I shot here?*

I glanced back into my own party. Private Ishag had been bouncing from one foot to the other the entire time, a small green-brown stain marking whatever degradation was ongoing or recently stopped under the bandages covering his left eye socket. To my surprise, it was Bennett-Fog who got cold feet this time. "We are happy to make sacrifices as a show of good faith, but this isn't our custom, and we have no intention of making such extreme demands of our allies" -





Ishag bounded forward, placing a long, callused hand in a vice grip on her shoulder. “I wouldn’t mind it.”

Their body bent far enough, balanced between two hands hooked in the floor’s tiny holes, that the hand at the end where they held the sling could point it straight at their own eye. I held my breath as one eye swivelled and targeted itself, drawing a line of sight to its own blindness like a bowstring. The other closed, and then it released. Dark purple acid, a splash of night sky under the black-light, burst over the domed surface and dripped in rivulets down the side of their face and neck, until the eyelid showed through again pockmarked and tattered, bleeding blue fluid through multiple holes.

Ishag’s good eye was popping. As the alien chorus rose again, he tried to join in with an awkward whistle.

*Now, for the medicine!*

From the covered palanquins in which they’d brought the gifts, our guests removed large blister packs filled with a gel that looked remarkably like the slick the Weirs melted into between forms. When placed on the recently destroyed eye - and the hand Hadak had broken - their surfaces melted onto the affected areas, covering them





like soap bubbles. The Towers presumably being healed swayed slowly back and forth, their heads hanging so that their crests pointed directly up. The same were offered to Hadak and Ishag.

“Will... will that work on us? On our biochemistry? We might have to run some tests, as far as we know it could kill us...”

One of the Weirs stepped up, extending its quills for Halation to communicate. *That's based on our technology. It should be fine - it's a kind of copy chemical that provides a rapidly adaptable resource for whatever your body itself wants to rebuild. This kind is locally sourced, probably less efficient than ours, and we think it's also neuroactive.*

Oh, of course. This was one of the techs I wanted to export to Earth. The only reason Ishag and the others were still as injured as they were, being treated with th, was that the Lung was already running low on supply, having given a lot away in the early days of devastation while awaiting help that never came. If it could really be produced locally... the question would be in what quantities, what resources we would need to control.





And until we knew how to exhaust or control it, we would need to shoot to kill.

“How precious is this gift?”

Hadak was standing still with his bubbled hand in front of him, a wide smile spreading across his face, humming what sounded like a Scottish folk tune.

*You can't make it here. Where we were going, there should have been good supplies, but now we can't say for certain we were given the right directions in the first place.*

Caleb Hadak's and Private Ishag's eyes were starting to roll back in their heads. The rhythm of their movements had a distinctly pendulumlike precision. But despite this state, Hadak tilted his shoulders and leaned his head over. “Well, how the hell do we get there and get ourselves a strategic stockpile of this already?”

I translated that delicately. They caught onto some of the threat of exclusivity anyway, or were just suspicious:

*It cannot be stockpiled, because a common internexus is managed by trade arrangement. As such, it requires a strict condition of secrecy as to sides in the war, and a ban on persons*

LVCIG121  
AEG  
TVCIS2  
VCCN25M  
MVECEHUS  
AIGENBU  
COMMOD  
H1202  
CBV10DU  
DDIPICE2  
2SE  
202LEWD1  
L20M  
0012  
M1000  
MVENU  
D0FOBE  
E1  
TVBOBE  
M1-01  
TMC1D1D0  
LEMBOR  
E102W0D  
CED DO  
ME EG11'  
V01112C1  
10V  
COM2ECIE  
VWE1'  
211  
D0G0B  
L20M  
T0REH





*or species recognizably affiliated in it. That would probably include you.*

*Wouldn't until they declare their position on the war to everyone at the internexus!*

“OK, and this is enforced by whom?”

I wanted to let that one stay safely behind the language barrier. But it was bugging me, especially as someone who had been studying non-hierarchical sociology - this kind of collective neutrality agreement made sense under widely distributed, anarchic conditions, but would be hard to maintain against any significant onslaught from an organized army. An anonymous crowd could suppress a terrorist or hostage-taker, but sides would be determined by the mere necessity of resisting or submitting to a force too large to overwhelm with numbers.

That, it turned out, was what had happened to most of them.

“So that means we basically have to secure the location against attack if we even want to maintain neutrality.” I was painfully aware how often Caroline’s words had been used as an excuse by humans, by white humans, by hu-





mans with ranks and weapons, like her and me, to devour what we wanted. And in that painful awareness, I thanked her for taking them out of my mouth. If we *could* maintain a neutral site, wouldn't that be better? But maybe that genuinely didn't occur to the sides here. Maybe they weren't as ruthless as us.

*That's not likely*, Halation reminded me sadly. *Maybe for now. But not for long.*

That was, after all, what she and her whole colony had assumed.

A thorn burned through my heart for a second - I was feeling the same thing I did when I wanted to take up arms in a human conflict, when I wanted to *make them pay for who they had hurt*. I knew it wasn't as simple as the ones I felt that way about on Earth - there wasn't an "oppressed" and an "oppressor", and I still didn't feel like I understood the philosophy around the Adipose well enough to say who was "right" or "wrong" either. But -

"Right. We also want to get a reconnaissance team to the surface where the unidentified explosive events are occurring and see if we can develop a plan for a counter-offensive. We brought a small squadron of fighter planes





on the ship, and this place has productive capacity for various kinds of flying technologies.”

*You think they're... dropping things on us. I got to watch the understanding dawn in, their body language, something - I don't know how I could possibly have been reading it but I could see it. Christ, they really had never even thought of bombardment. They had spent their entire history living under a thing that could have bombarded them any time it wanted, and never wanted to.*

*We used to send people up to communicate and do micro-repairs to thank the network. Chimneys like this one. We had shuttle points. Launching small craft into the upper atmosphere to make contact with hub stations of the network when they passed overhead. I haven't heard if any of the ones near here have been active since it went down.*

“Do you think they could be using one? Or we could use one to counterattack?”

*They'll know the way, we can find out, there's a guide at the internexus.*

“OK this sounds about right,” I thought out loud. “We can provide you an escort to the internexus, secure its





neutrality and establish a resupply point, then send a group onward to the shuttle point and set up a base for”

“Wait, doesn’t this one have the same capabilities?” Caroline reminded me. “There’s a big-ass Asymmetry Field in the mouth of the chimney. I bet that’s what they use here to launch stuff.”

I translated her hypothesis to them. “Is that true?”

That’s what they told us we were doing here. Demolishing an out of commission shuttle point on the way to the internexus. So it’s not used as one any more?

I had to check that with the Weirs - in the very early years, they had done some shuttling to establish alibis, but of course there was no reason to now.

*No reason? Wouldn’t you want to get clues about what took out the network?*

*A whole fleet of repair craft went up the moment it went down. They collected all that was left. The ones that came back.*







It made enough sense that air superiority hadn't been at the top of anyone's minds here. That said, it was clearly affecting their ability to function underground.

Our guests were fidgeting, starting to unwrap more things from the palanquin, being motioned to stop and motioning to continue. I checked back in and updated the leader on the general course of our private conversation, and they made a long, dismissive noise almost like a whinny. *Is all this really the first thing you want to talk about when you meet a new species that isn't even in any of the interstellar registries? We haven't had an information feast in twelfth-exponent units, and we've thought about nothing but war in all that time.*

"Have I told you," Caroline began in her confiding voice I didn't know what to do with, "I've been developing a theory I'd love to submit to the Edison Lens internal research journal if that still mattered, that the invention of strategy is a psychological breakthrough of willing yourself to think about warfare. That for most of history, people fought basically unconscious from the trauma. That this is what separates us from..." she gently indicated Fingal Hadak who had begun an impossibly coordinated dance "...that guy." Fingal Hadak thought about





warfare even more than she did, that was his problem, I thought but didn't want to get into. "That might be what we're going to be fighting. But don't assume."

I wasn't paying attention. I was trying to figure out where I would start to explain a history that produced thoughts like that like it was a campfire story. We had Weirs, and half of them were looking forward to seeing a movie, but an "information feast" (a computational life concept, Halation tells me, which they probably learned from their planet's network) could be held in any formal constraint or medium, and I wanted to do it in words.

I didn't want to think leaving the base myself was an unacceptable risk in itself, because then I would be fucked almost whatever I did, but I was for obvious reasons unusually jumpy. Especially if this whole out-of-character attack was some sort of plot. No reason it had to be Hadak's either. Hadn't he himself had been warning me about Beek, who he had served with, and was also acting happy to shoulder the role of staying on base and keeping the lights on?





In the last two months before launch Azoth and Edison Lens with the help of Halation had whipped up the Azoth Denpa (set to roll out for civilian use in six months on Earth - with an open source version for our use connected to the Clamp network en route in this very capsule - Bashtaev had almost gotten one of those) - a low-level smartphone (capable of visuals on the level of a PC-98) that transmitted data packets like a regular military walkie-talkie, with a wide frequency-hopping range that would be difficult to systematically block. It would allow me to transmit complex orders and even speak on projection anywhere I had soldiers.

We were giving ourselves two Lung-days to prepare the expedition. The group we'd met, who called themselves what I'll translate The Sunbites (the word referring to a partial glimpse of the sun through the bend of a tunnel opening on the sky - travelling companies of this size gave themselves names a bit like bands on Earth) - would go down the plug and try to make a deal with our original allies for some extra supplies. If possible, I wanted to get one job done by then.

But most of the day I had strategic documents to pore over, supplies checklists to approve, units to divide up to





keep the potential loyalties I'd flagged in my own secret spreadsheets balanced.

Nobody was used to scheduling anything in the 13th hour.

Of course Bashtaev's Denpa was being tracked, and of course he'd gotten rid of it first thing.

Of course the Ahasurunu had their own ways of finding where people were, gentle rains of Asymmetric radiation that could model every matter-state boundary in the Playscape, with one exception. Of course he had just stumbled into it.

The duodenal knot of computationalized tunnels half-encircled the triple-airgapped chamber surrounding the Adipose node, feeding particles and objects through the walls in inversely semipermeable bubbles and calculating the results of experiments. As soon as Bashtaev had entered, the computational mind had projected an Asymmetry Field and cut itself off from the rest of the complex, making it even more impossible than it already was for him to reach the Node, but also impossible to perceive anything inside.





“Can’t it just make one of its bubbles and spit him out back at us.” Waldo Beek had sounded convincingly flustered on the phone with me interpreting for them if he was behind this, although he probably wouldn’t have prepared for this outcome either.

“It can’t do that with living beings it’s less than three exchange factorials interoperable with. Partly to keep the experiments within Meteorological bounds, and partly to minimize risk of the kind of thing that happened to your station.” This directed somewhat cruelly at Halation.

“So you’re telling me, you guys do all your high tech stuff through these whole other computer guys you have to worry about going over to the enemy? Maybe I’m a primitive Earthling but if Skynet happened I’d go back to the pony express.”

“This isn’t a symbiote, our computational core was designed and extruded from raw elements here in the Lung. But anything that smart can randomly autonomize. And we want to limit what we can tell it to do, too.”

“Hey wait, did you ever fix the radio bug?”





Beek glared daggers at me. He'd wanted to keep that in our back pocket as an advantage against our allies as well as our enemies. But it didn't matter, Meteorological standard procedure for technological exchange was testing all known technologies against each other for such vulnerabilities. "This is also the computer that does that. It's Contact-proofed, it has way more redundant packet systems and radiation resistance than a cheap escape craft. That's... also why it won't give him back, probably. If it's doing anything it's First Contact procedures."

"Will it be... done those in some timeframe? And then give him back?"

"That's the problem. It has a right to greet a first guest itself, for as long as it wants. We are normally very careful about who we allow to do this - we hadn't even approved you when you visited."

"A 'right'? And it's not even 'autonomized'?" Bennett-Fog squeaked in terror. "What stopped it from just reaching out and grabbing Leona while she was there?"

"It's a semi-Solipsist. We can only give it requests in a specialized format relating them to its internal function - part of its security is that beyond this it does not





model the outside world at all. This is the reason we can have such powerful systems and not face internal threats. Their internal values are simple and we understand them well. Our exchanges of benefits are simple and we understand them well. We have been doing the same with other lifeforms, weather systems, ecosystems for millions of years. Interoperability does not demand convergence towards absolute autonomy or absolute subservience, but towards finite intersections of wills.”

“So if we go in...”

“It will probably not oppose you, provided your own presence is as interesting as a guest. We do not expect it to change its value system due to contact - it is, again, designed to do this.”

The Ahasurunu were far more terrified than this of the gun which had already killed four or five pursuers. Asymmetry fields were inconvenient to miniaturize enough for this kind of close combat (except as bubbles within a larger one) - there were a few (codenamed “Bishops”) reserved for this kind of extreme event around the Playscape but Bashtaev had made it to sanctuary before they’d been able to maneuver any to counter him. For now they were, despite everything, grudgingly happy to





leave us to clean up our own mess. “Far be it from me to discourage heroism,” Hadak had smirked. “But whatever special capabilities you get from having an alien inside you, you’re an untrained civilian going up against a guy who, *skraeling* though he is, has woken up on a battlefield every day for the past decade.” That wasn’t true - he’d had several intervals of decommission - you could hear the Waldo Beek fanboy in Hadak when he said things like that. “It doesn’t seem to be working out great for the aliens. Take a team at least.” So as much as I wanted to be the first and maybe last human to see him, to interrogate him one on one, I weighed those words and picked the two non-Jax members of Rho Aias I trusted most to operate with me - Baugh, the ex-Academi guy (a whistleblower who’d been on Beek until he was quietly blacklisted for going after some of Beek’s funders) and Serrao, a Brazilian who had done rainforest defense black ops for the Workers’ Party (he wore twists and tiny gold sunglasses that looked like scarab shells). We would move connected through Halation. Three was about the maximum number Halation could interface with at any resolution that would matter on a battlefield at once. It might still be disorienting for all of us - but I had practiced, with Jax and Alastair back on Earth, using “mind palace” techniques to stabilize the connection in a legi-





ble, compartmentalized interface through which we could consult each other's perceptions and select physical enhancements without too much confusing mental feedback. The "line" of our connection couldn't extend much more than 12 feet without communicative and cognitive degradation. I hadn't told Beek or Bennett-Fog the extent to which we could do this, which would undoubtedly make them all the more eager to establish independent links with Weirs. Whatever I had said in the negotiations, it was increasingly obvious we were going to do this at some point, and what I had to ensure was that by the time we did I had as much self-perpetuating hegemony here as they did on Earth.

We set off by Lung-night.

Christ, now I sound like Jack Vance.

Clouds, in outline and underlight, could only be said to boom around us, ripples in purple static. The colour layers that blent so beautifully in the daylight piled into indistinction, although there were still gentle shimmers of blue and green illuminated by flashes of lightning like giant peacock feathers.





Each semi-fetal in a bubble of the vehicle I was learning to call a Corpuscule, we floated up to the aperture in the membrane and a single Ahasurunu, a longtime fan of Halation's transmissions, was there to let us across.

The Playscape had split open in four pieces (that I could see) to let us through, listing slightly where they hung, hundreds of tunnels open in cross-section, covered by shimmering semi-permeable bubbles. The pieces looked darker and more unified in colour (each a slightly different node on the spectrum of plum-indigo), more than I thought the difference in lighting alone could account for, but I didn't ask. The computerized tunnels glowed light blue-green; the Asymmetry Field around it invisible except as we approached its edges bent like we were looking at it across the surface of water, until it seemed to wrap all the way around us, the single opening a blue-black snake's gullet traced by jagged lines of blue-green light that receded seemingly endlessly before turning down, spackled with bright points of all colours.

Our vehicle stopped and three Ahasurunu prepared us to enter by etching a sigil like a QR code, a tailed square filled in with rectilinear whorls, on the surface of each bubble. The vehicles themselves had these patterned





channels for the fluid forms of Weirs - they didn't have the surface control to maintain such complex shapes by themselves. They weren't Spider-man symbiotes, they moved by complex pressure cascades and a kind of surface tension mechanism for mapping bodies they made contact with. Their standard form, while it spent little time moving anyway, was more fully articulated (if delicate, requiring a couple hours to reconstitute itself after even minor impacts), and fighting integrated with Halation wasn't a zero-sum tradeoff with letting myself and Halation fight separately - one of the reasons I'd been able to convince Beek we could use it sparingly.

Halation rushed in to fill the hair-thin channels as soon as they were completed and each time seared my mind with an abrupt and inexplicable shift in awareness, like falling in a dream, less total than even the first sensations of her own presence but similar in the sense of a separate perspective observing my own, although each time felt disconcertingly like I myself was the other perspective and though I found myself returned to my own with no new knowledge or awareness, wasn't sure I had returned the same person.





As we passed through, our surroundings distorting as if seen through something more viscous than water, the Corpuscule rearranged itself. My retainers' bubbles rotated below and lifted mine between them, forming an up-right triangle, like the swivelling feet of a motor protein. Halation stood out in sharp, painterly patterns across its surface, phosphorescing gently.

Our Scar-Ls pointed out of the now-rigidly spherical bubbles, in which we were crouched like hamster-wheels, the two "feet" strafing to either side with the Scar-Ls fanning out in a 120% serpent's gaze with the PX4s in opposite hands guarding our rear. Halation's markings created several arrays of their body's natural infrared sensors forming a half-conscious security camera grid in our augmented vision.

From large leather pockets hanging on our belts, each of us released an Azoth Bulbul tricopter drone, mounted with the miniaturized ground-penetrating radar we'd been test running for use in the caverns, passing with a slight pop through the membranes.

Our feathery markings, like the flames first mistaken for wings on angels, floated over the outline cracks. The tunnel here was just big enough for our armour to walk in.





First we had to get the Corpuscle to one of the internal hangars. Only the main arterial tunnels surrounding the computational area at perpendicular cross-sections (albeit quite winding, not straightforward circles) were big enough to allow it through in this form. The hangar was near the centre of the structure.

Periodically these cracks emitted sprays of coloured, sparking steam that reminded me of the kind that so often filled environments in seventies sci-fi movies (I kept thinking of the half-hours I spent trying to capture that all over sketchpad paper, even though my drawing was shitty at everything else). This was the computational medium itself, a gas composed of semi-entangled particles spontaneously forming a vast array of complex temporary molecules, dwarfing the organic register, as semantic units in its code, communicating by photons and instantaneous electromagnetic communications that arced through the smoke. (Even with all these layers of internal communication, only about 20% of the medium could be aware of itself at any one time, so it was less accurate to speak of the computer as a mind than as a shared dream of a bubbling complex of minds.) The tunnel system's similarity to a brain made me wonder if there was any relation to the development of human consciousness (*the*





gut too, Halation wants to remind me, *you have a whole ecosystem in there I can't even interface with*), although the neural nets within Halation for instance looked more like the branches of a slime mold, and Ahasurunu had a cavity that looked like the inside of a pomegranate with some unique capacities for running in parallel - *hey, keep your head in the game*, Baugh relayed to me through a sheepish Halation. To him (at this moment, as it was to me once I got my head back in the game) the salient fact of the computational medium was that it made radar spotty.

The drones scoped out all the tunnels around the hangar up to 20 metres distance, focusing on the computationally inert buffer tunnels, where local radar and communications were most effective. As we were dismounting (semipermeable patterns peeling out into a hatch), Baugh noticed one had disappeared.

It had been in a small, tightly knotted coil about a dozen metres above us, where oppositely charged tunnels (at a quark level indistinguishable to humans) were wrapped around each other in a double helix. Perfect for if he wanted to pick us off one by one.

"We can't just cut through any of this stuff, can we?" Baugh asked.





Responding to the image Halation sent through my mind (and his, but just in case) I flicked out my Cold Steel (“the Hedgehog”, I’d nicknamed it, because I’m a loser) SRK and scored a line across the wall nearest us. A range of cobalt triangular crystals iterated around the gash.

“Fuck. What happens if they just make tanks out of this shit?”

“Impossible without computationalizing them - expensive, costly, and renders them relatively autonomous. I mean there are other forms of self-repair. Mostly they just mean you have to blow stuff up one-hit.”

Baugh shrugged. “OK then. I guess we’re all just taking your word for it.” Halation gave him a mild static shock through our connection - he should have been able to perceive the information directly, but I had no idea (without looking, which I didn’t) how he was phenomenizing what she shared or if he was even paying attention. “Ow!”

“Feels like a trap,” Serrao pondered. “There any way we can like, smoke him out?”

“Already plenty of smoke here.” One of the micro-tunnels vented between us and Baugh waved it away. It tingled on





our skin and smelled slightly of an impossible mixture of scents, the strongest a bit like cherry and brine.

As we crawled into the larger tunnel that would branch off into the coil, we noticed more than smells - ghostly images were projected on the smoke, uncanny in detail for their faintness. Soviet-style blocks collapsing, a child staring at the ballooning waves of dust from the other side of a fence. Picking at bookshelves in a deserted apartment while a commander kept a bead on a window - Bhagavad Gita, Mircea Eliade, Pierre Guyotat. "Caralho!" Serrao whisper-laughed at one of a young man, glossy black hair already hanging in sharp square bangs tucked behind one ear, sucking a bearded Banderite's dick in the cockpit of a tank.

"Is this normal?" Baugh conferred nervously. "Does this mean he can see..."

"Us? Quite possibly." It was a disconcerting thought.

"Can we see him?" Serrao added. "Like not his memories or whatever, but where he is now."

"If he can see us, and we're not seeing him, he's probably hiding in one of the computationally inert tunnels." It





wasn't just pictures, those were just the clearest - intrusive thoughts were popping like soda bubbles, auditory hallucinations crackling in one ear and out the other too fast to record even in memory. The communion with Halation and two other people was already overwhelming enough, I couldn't even factor everything else into the mix - I was uncomfortably aware not only of my mind's limits but the way I was already overflowing them all the time, all my senses half-present in each other's peripherals, somehow just trusting everything that mattered to jump out of the haze of gestalt. "But we should check if this is supposed to be happening."

I pulled my Denpa out of one pocket and the Ahasurunu speech-wheel out of another. Since I had confirmed the mission with the rest of the command structure, we had set up a special three-way for the emergency recon operation we were calling Wryneck - but I hadn't told Beek and Bennett-Fog that the signal probably wouldn't reach from here. What I was really relying on was the secret direct link that would transmit the vibrations from inside my body as data packets. The speech-wheel was set to subsonic vibrations which would route its tones directly into my bloodstream, so it couldn't be heard from inside





here either - at least, not by unaided human ears, which I had assumed would be enough.

I began "speaking" with the standardized "greeting" melody, to ensure someone was picking up. I waited for a response in kind, trying to think in standard units instead of seconds - after a dozen eighth-exponent, alarming for this mode of communication, I began again - I might have gotten it all out if my fingers were used to the language, weren't shaking - *I think it's interfering here*, Halation warned me as I fumbled, *it must be more active than they expected, we need to get to a buffer* - a serpent's head flickered out of the wall and smashed the speech-wheel out of my hand.

Smashed the speech-wheel altogether, six keys collapsed into each other, ones I needed. One hand turning and catching it as it fell, the other spun around and swung the knife after it, as Baugh and Serrao trained their guns on the hole in the wall that blinked palely as if nothing had happened.

"Aw hell, HAL 9000," Serrao whispered.





“Yeah I think we better back out,” Baugh advised. “This is one of those exponential uncertainty situations Bennett-Fog keeps talking about.”

Bennett-Fog and Halation reared up against each other in my mind. They fought over a pit of primal terror: had I already allowed the birth of another, worse me... a single human perspective implanted in all the weight of first contact - but this time, between an unpredictable extremist and a computer god I couldn't understand? With access to a superweapon, to our enemy...

Halation took over from my despair. “There's no way... Anashirana would have trusted their experiments to a mind that badly Contact-proofed! *I'm* the one whose stupid recklessness killed them - don't ever ask me to pretend the opposite would happen and give me an excuse to back out of making up for it!”

In the lava of survivor's guilt, my depressive hesitation was the scales of cooling rock, and Halation's the liquid fire.

The professionals glanced at each other nervously, but with a kind of admiration.





“Besides - that didn’t feel like computationalized material.” It had been too fast to see, but it had brushed past Halation on contact. “That felt like a Weir.”

“Weirs aren’t supposed to be able to do that, right? If there’s a fucking mutant Carnage Weir on here that’s also pretty bad...”

Behind my thinking silhouette spread a projection of a man praying the *salat* in a RPG-damaged mosque with pointed branches wedged out of its earthen-brick dome in the shadow of uncannily domed mountains, warm on cool brown. A twenty-year-old confessing his disbelief to a NATO handler who said every suicide bomber he’d ever met felt the same way.

The serpent’s head whipped back around Baugh’s leg, dragging him cursing into the tunnel.

A tentacle - wasn’t that too human an idea compared to everything we’d seen so far?

We found him pulling himself up from the trough of the first loop, shallow but ragged wounds flaming around and in his leg. While I was focused on him it reappeared from above us and wrapped around Serrao’s throat. I





unloaded half my pistol towards where it had appeared and it disappeared before the crystal could completely cover over where it had come through, which I smashed through with the knife to confirm - for a split second, before it doubled - was one of the micro-tunnels spouting luminous steam nickelodeons. Was I really acting, reacting faster than them? Was I really leading? Or was it deference to the fiction of my leadership, or Halation, or Bennett-Fog's baffling games of *exponential uncertainty*, or Delilah Pankhurst- from another, it caught my unguarded wrist again. Serrao and Baugh, having grasped my strategy, tried to pin it with rains of near-point-blank fire.

I trusted them to allow my eyes to drift, as I picked myself up from the tube slide floor I'd felt my ischium against, over the new projection of a Weir sliding itself through the grooves of a platform up his pale leg, naked except for the boot, early varicose veins and irregularities standing out between taut skin and muscle. His neck jerked to alert the others and then went silent. Unilateral control, if this was it, would represent about the highest crime possible under general Weir and specifically Meteorological norms, but I could tell it wasn't: I could smell it or breathe it in the data packets or something. It had *said* something, but I couldn't make out any of the





information filtering through the mist except the visual, that strange self-destructive fascination of humans and especially modern and European humans, enough to say what.

Overconfident. It was too fast and unpredictable. It lashed me across the back and I fell to my knees and wrists. *Weir, and metal.*

Meanwhile the multiplying bursts of repair-crystal were starting to hem us in - Serrao kicked to send one scattering and it nearly speared his leg as he ran past.

(He pumped his fist and one knee at his escape and an image flickered out past the jagged pillar - Serrao splitting a sixteen-piece chocolate chip banana pizza with a dozen landless workers in the back of a hijacked logging truck, sliding up his glasses to accidentally reveal tears sticking the lashes of his bloodshot eyes together.)

I couldn't quite lift my shoulders all the way without triggering the faultline in my back, sending spasms and blood-tickles cascading down my sides.

But as it had passed, Halation had recorded its surface.





A chain, ending in a crescent knife. A severed finger, hooked through the loop at the knife's base, stabbed through at its base by the chain's first link.

It wasn't our standard knife, but the non-standard forces were permitted to keep a personal. Karambit. Damn it. I had flashbacks to that knife.

The finger explained it. A Weir couldn't move like that under its own internal power, but it could map to a body and shift force slightly along it to allow shockingly complex coordination... the engineer's chain, that he'd worn with the Sacred Band bridged his body, connecting the Weir to the part he'd cut off.

The chain was around thirty-five metres - a bit longer than our maximum connection - so if I could calculate that from the internal map of the channels, how far it could have travelled through the ones that opened at these few entrances thankfully marked by Serrao and Baugh's crystalline impacts...

Halation couldn't do that in their head (not while coordinating this much, amazed as I was that they could do it normally). Even if we could, we didn't have a system of





coordinates that would necessarily be communicable to them.

A drone could - but he'd picked off the last few that were anywhere near us while I recovered. (Their last recorded coordinates we could use too...)

The Corpuscle's internal AR projection could overlay several dozen coordinate systems. I could use my blood-stream connection (which could pick up the sonic vibrations of Halation's Ahasurunu song-speech through my capillaries) even without the speech-wheel or the Denpa.

I turned and tried to run and collapsed to my hands. Halation jerked my shoulders around, trying to find ways to compensate for my normal muscular connections. Baugh reached down first and gave me a lift onto his back.

(I disrupted a cloud of vapour in which he was frantically scrabbling to piece his face together, waking up covered in cuts from a glass table his head had fallen through, the shards spotted with cocaine thumbprints. All his efforts scattered again to red flecks.)

“We need to get back to the thing.”





2'  
LVCIT121  
AET  
GVCN2  
VCCNM2M  
HRECEM2  
AOLERNV  
CMMODO  
R. 202  
EVAIDV  
PRTVICE2  
22E  
202LEND1  
1120M  
0N12  
VT10NV  
WVEMV  
DOKORE  
E1  
GVBORE  
W1 01  
IWCID1D0  
LELBOV  
E102M0D  
2E1 DO  
WE EG11  
VDT12C1  
10M  
COM2EC1E  
WHEL  
211  
DOKOR  
1120M  
GOMEM

“I told you that a few minutes ago.”

“No, not like that. I need to get it to a buffer tunnel.”

He eyed the stalagmite now almost bisecting the tunnel.

“Hmm. We’re not gonna be able to get through that like this.”

“Need me to break it again?” Serrao yelled from the other side.

The chain rose again from below, Karambit arcing right up towards his fly, the black sickle claw in that ritual I spent so many nights imagining but never actually saw and couldn’t prove had ever actually taken place...

Halation kicked in, steering through both of us, catching the chain in his hand, lunging and pulling it through the stalagmite of repair-material as we crossed in the split second of reformation. The chain of multiplied force from the other end burned and chafed Baugh’s palm down to white fat and blood, even through Halation’s opalescent laminate; he released just as the blade raced back towards the base of his thumb, just in time for it to get caught where the reforming crystal pinned it in the middle of a solid column from base to ceiling.





Not sure how long this would last - this type of symbiotic skill varied in the first place between Weirs, one capable of something like this had to be incredibly old and trained in neurological arts - I set Serrao to guard at the mouth of the tunnel.

Having pinned it was convenient in letting us make it any distance without getting sliced to bits, but posed a bit of a problem - the Corpuscle would have nothing to measure. It couldn't fit in the tunnel where we'd been fighting before. So, Halation relayed, as soon as we were safely in the Corpuscle - I could return to my bubble, not having to move too much - Serrao would fire into the tunnel, break the repair surface *again*, and Halation would contract, pulling us together and leading the chain toward the safety and analytic capabilities of the Corpuscle.

If the timing wasn't exactly right, well, he assured me grimly though the connection, he'd just close his eyes and let the same instincts take over from night-fighting loggers' goons in the Amazon black.

Through the hangar flickered currents of images: trading jeers, then Kabbalistic interpretations, then semen with a twenty-three-year-old Israeli defector turned trainer





in the CAR - waking up to his crooked-mouthed corpse puppeted over your straw bed by Fingal Hadak, his men grabbing your feet...

I winced and tuned the images out. In any case it turned out I hadn't prepared for the right contingency. As soon as we slip-slid back into the hangar, lifted ourselves gingerly through the membrane, and turned the Corpuscle back around as we relayed the signal... clapping gunshots, sucking silence, then Serrao, his bullets, the sound of his shout pushed out the mouth of the tunnel into us by an expanding Asymmetry bubble.

*Fuck. I should have expected... I was thinking like you, Hala-tion's reflection a black bubble in my mind as I tumbled around the careening bubble of the Corpuscle, colours and displays flashing around me. Not you, like one of you. Like if it could repair itself it wouldn't mind us treating that like a rule we could exploit freely, like it wouldn't mind...*

Then the layer of Asymmetry melted like a soap bubble and we were falling in a mostly translucent chute, half-able to see the shapes and colours of the nesting tunnels and chambers around us, the faintly glowing capillaries and flatworms of the smaller channels. There above the kidney-shaped organelle of the hangar, the double helix





we had been searching - the buffer tunnel, like ours, translucent - opening onto this larger buffer colon. Despite the shock, we were perfectly positioned. Another drone was now on radar, returning from a detour below us. I pulled the Corpuscule into a formation where the two “feet” bubbles (Serrao was hanging off the leg of his, still struggling to shift his weight through the semipermeable portal) pushed up against both walls of the tunnel, resisting the slight gravity with friction. Holding still long enough for Serrao to get back in, I whistled the connection passcode for my secret comm and the opening cadences of my plan and request. We would lock in and spin back up the tunnel, send a drone in, lure the chain out and analyze its location -

Bashtaeв’s vitruvian silhouette dropped from above, crashing down on my bubble on all fours.

The chain grabbed Serrao by the ankle, pulling him as far away as his collection with Halation would let him, preventing us from turning as we slowly slid down the chute. Where Halation unspooled after him from the markings, Bashtaeв’s Weir rushed in to fill them, deep plum against green-yellow and orange.

LVCIG121  
AEG  
TVCIS2  
VCCN125M  
MVECEHUS  
AIGENBU  
COMMOD  
202  
CBVOTDU  
PRIVICES2  
SLEWBI  
125M  
0012  
MIGOU  
MVENU  
DORORE  
TUVORE  
M1-01  
MVC1D100  
LEMLOR  
E102W0D  
2ED DO  
ME EG11'  
VD112CI  
10V  
COMSECTE  
MVE1'  
211  
DOROR  
125M  
T0REH





*Who are you,* Halation demanded at their fluctuating frontier, which was quickly losing ground to their opponent's superior neurological control.

I pushed my hand through the semi-permeable, shoulder numbed by Weir-patterns like feathers, my pistol into his clavicle. Bashtaev grabbed my wrist and pulled.

*The last Servant of Possibility:* Bashtaev's voice echoing through the distance of their hijacker: *And the first, first of thousands, millions...*

Thumbing through the Zohar and the Shams al-Ma'arif in the grass with a golden henna-tattooed hand on his knee, trying to eke out a thread of meaning he'd felt bleeding through the battlefield from one body's dying breath to another. *These were not the bodies we were meant to live in - our souls were not only more real than our bodies, but more body than our bodies - our souls were not something else, intangible, but the proper state of our bodies - what we loved in our bodies could be infinitely more without these parasitic layers of death that broke and fossilized and succumbed - when you were alive, you were both body and soul, until death betrayed you - but in the Day of Judgment everything would be like this, both body and soul - man, plant and animal, living and once-dead. The godless men of Sodom*





*took virgin angels on Earth, the fundamentalists believed they would take virgin angels in heaven, in heaven we would be always virgin whatever we did to each other, always new.*

*The Servants of Possibility, Halation recognized - the ancient heresy that wanted to make all matter maximally inter and intra-operable. The ones who made the Sandpit nebula self-aware.*

So against all odds, humanity was off the hook. The extremist was from here all along - though they had hijacked a distinctly human longing.

Did that even count as “extremism”? As opposed to “radicalism” - not a distinction I’d ever put a ton of stock in anyway? I hadn’t had the time or rather space I’d have wanted to think about it, like I had with the Adipose conflict and even that... From some human vantage point it was no more “extreme” than the endless scruples of Meteorology. It felt like something Mai would at least entertain, which counted against my personal negative definition of extremism.

But she also would have recoiled at the bottomless resentment (something other than pain, other than anger, she’d first proven to me, though she and Delilah had





their different definitions) bleeding across the Weir's boundary (*Anashirana hid me, invited me here for my expertise, but cut me out of every experiment, cut me out of first contact*) - imagine cursing a nebula, a planet, a star, an asteroid belt with *that consciousness*...

And I wouldn't have time to think about it if I lost here. Maybe no one would.

Bashtaev collapsed against the side of the bubble, trapping me half-in and half-out. Serrao, climbing up the other side, had grabbed his ankle in turn.

The unoccupied bubble was now drifting lazily down into the middle of the tunnel, the rest of the craft with it. Halation steered mine around as Serrao and Bashtaev wrestled on top of it (I let myself fall back, trying to position my gun beneath his attention while letting the surface protect me from the flying chain) to take its place opposite Baugh's as the other "foot", with the empty bubble rising to the centre. Timing, spin, grip - Bashtaev saw it coming and fought it, but we had too many players, too many advantages. As the Corpuscle stabilized in its new formation, my bubble pinned Bashtaev against the wall - which just stretched, skin squashed in ugly-pale circles between translucence and translucence, not crushed with





the pressure as I'd hoped, although the spin of the bubble was scraping his Weir off with friction.

But Halation had just about lost control of the bubble we'd elevated to the "head".

Feathers now burning indigo, the empty bubble dropped from above the two "feet". The Corpuscle's spin intensified as it sped down the buffer tunnel in the opposite direction, out towards the computational sector's exit and beyond it, the Asymmetry Field only a Corpuscle could cross to reach the Adipose node.

Bashtaev's chain hooked into the unoccupied bubble's surface and pulled him out from under mine, Serrao almost pulled into his place but jumping in with me instead. He tested the membrane between the bubble and the connecting tubule, then positioned his rifle through it like a sniper. Baugh did the same on the other side.

Bashtaev caught on and clung to the outside of his chosen cockpit without pulling himself in. Standing up on its "bottom", he pointed both of his own guns at where we were now all too carefully positioned and began to spray wildly.







The Corpuscle was designed to withstand impacts at the 1000mph speeds of winds on Contemplation - not the 1000 mps speeds of human firearms. The bubbles shredded around us into scraps like popped balloons, and jagged crystal teeth gnashed from the walls of the tunnel after us.

Ironically, this saved us - fire clipped my shoulder, Ser-rao's cheek, Baugh's rib, but without the friction of the bubbles against the walls we still fell faster.

And all of Halation that had been stuck in the channels of the Corpuscle now stretched directly between us like a taffy rope. Not as strong or manipulable as his chain, which immediately leapt out to surround us - but suddenly faltered in midair.


The tightening bond ran right under his feet, and had fought its way through the letters covering his body all the way up to his wrist.

I kicked out as I landed on top of him and we burst into open storm.





Sophie and Andrea pulled away from the moonlit ribbon of the road an hour later, the feather-fringed jacket she'd bought with the gloves whipping against her knotted neck. She hadn't sent or received any texts from the car, terrified to disturb the quantum superposition of her plan, and didn't get data that far out, so she couldn't have seen the server blowing up with the reports from the police blotter, and obnoxious Twitch stream spam and reaction images from 2005, which she would rip everyone's guts out over in the most widely circulated statement the next day.



Delilah had gotten a call through on the road, which she wouldn't find in her voice mail until later. A brief recording was posted on her ultra-ultra-priv for thirty minutes; Mai always meant to delete it from her collection once she realized it hadn't been meant to be shared, but never did at least before we broke up. "It's like trying hormones for the first time. Like it's real, they can actually have this. You'd think it shouldn't be, like you wanna believe they're all wasting their money on stupid crap and everything that matters you can have if you stay home and water your plants, pet your cats." Sophie had rows of potted plants in her lightly frosted window like votive candles. "But you can have this. You can have the future. When





they said I was a boy, they only let the boy bodies have the future like this. And I would collect all these things, the robots, the rockets, the cars, and I just didn't get why I had to be the boy to have them. I wanted to play with them with the girls, because they all wanted to play with them too. And then everyone started talking about it and stopped talking about it at the same time. Everyone stopped believing any of the things we had dreamed about were real anyway, and even critiquing gender for a lot of people just meant forgetting all of the dreams from both directions..."

Sophie waited for sixteen minutes in sensory deprivation in Andrea's sweater, while Andrea tried the whole rundown of call centre tricks to get service. It was such absolute silence that the rage could finally hear itself. She'd cast it out into the world to be taken from her by the jeering anons by posting the following texts that failed to send to her Instagram story:

*i cant do this*

*u know i cant do this*

*& i know u can*





*if you needed to do some ridic fastnfurious stunt to me @ a specil time u could do it*

*u know even a few minutes wil b hell 4 me*

*idk if im even scared anymore*

*if u showing up in a few minutes and saying its just a few minutes and ur sorry u triggered me is better than what im triggered about*

*gdi i bet that's ur point or sumth*

The next cornerstone of any reconstruction would be this screencap from a conversation in the Discord server: *when I moved here Timer Edwards lived in Seattle, actually I think he still lives here but he was opening offices, trying to launch that weird katamari of a platform Eos. one of the original Azoth funders and the actual coder of the main kernel of the Azoth Wizard according to Emily Cann's book, but more importantly to me he wrote a book I read when I was a kid, V-space Raider. @lungefire (me, at that point) has actually read it, although she hated it lol, she has better taste than me. it's almost impossible to find now. it kind of anticipates a lot of things about contemporary influencer culture that no one was really onto in the 90s, certainly not Tron or*

LVCIG121  
AEG  
TVCN2  
VCCN25W  
MVECEH2  
NIGENBU  
CONMODD  
N1202  
CBVOTDU  
N111ICE2  
2SE  
202LEWD1  
12504  
0012  
N11000  
MVENU  
D0FOBE  
E1  
TUV0BE  
M1-01  
TMC1D1D0  
1ENL0B  
E102W0D  
2ED DO  
ME EG11'  
YD1112CI  
10B  
COM2ECTE  
"E1'  
211  
D0G0B  
12504  
T0REN





*The Matrix or whatever people compare it to, also the main character is a boy who makes their VR character a girl and then just spends the entire book as her. I've done like five rants about it in the lit channel but most people don't know it was Timer Edwards under a pseudonym, which is also in the Emily Cann book. anyway this is like, the last year I was still a repper and was also hoping really really hard to get hired at his new company. then when I was waiting in the lobby for an interview and he was doing his fashionably late thing, didn't show up at the office until noon with a White Claw wearing his suit jacket like a shonen character - this woman who kept going back and forth doing some sort of administrative thing came down and sat next to me. she said like, how old are you, you're too pretty, he'll eat you up like one of us. this was years before all the allegations but just months before the bonfire. and like I never had the political lesbianism arc some of you did, but I do remember thinking, well I might as well...*

The character in V-space Raider - the screenshot was packaged with an infographic - drove a F-355 customized to sync between real and virtual space. It had long been suspected to be Edwards' favourite car. The media didn't report who owned the one Delilah crashed, but after Sophie disappeared with her parents' lawyer for a week,





whoever it was quietly and strangely settled something out of court with Sophie.

To me, sprawled on her futon that one time she let me stay over and was having one of her hypersexual episodes, or just sensed how much I was vibrating to be near her, or just never had someone to top her instead - Mai was fine with it, but I was afraid of completing her mosaic of grief with this episode the way Navajo sandpainters were afraid of completing their paintings: "I think everyone with a heart has a bullet they have to bite if they get to it. A lot of the thing the one shrink called OCD - I don't call it that because it's not like Sophie's OCD at all, but it's why I get hers - has been about figuring out what that is to me. For a lot of dolls transition is that, but it wasn't for me because as soon as it clicked, there was nothing scary about it at all? I didn't care about any of the things that would be harder and I didn't care about anyone's opinion who would complain about it. Maybe it's because ever since the bonfire, the amanita, I've become super aware of all the choices and options I really have at all times, that I've made it so the bullet I bite has to be something really crazy, maybe an actual bullet even. Because it's like - I'm a good driver and I understand the mechanics of the road, I can break the rules, speed, drift,



do all these things a normal driver can't, but I still can't go outside the actual rails or I'll crash. I can make these deals with the world that look crazy unless you've really thought about or tried them, but there are deals that are designed to be too costly to make no matter what. I still don't know if I'd be able to do it when the time comes. Most of the people I've met who I think really did, or could were women - my mom running away from her parents, even though she couldn't argue when they said she had no idea how to raise me. My high school girlfriend paying for her mom's whole cancer treatment with her college fund." She was always running off into stories like this, always in misty-eyed sleepover confession mode, always about to fall all over you to bear the weight and warmth of them.

The F355 feels like driving on an Olympic skating rink. There's no friction, but there's weight, drag from the rear wheels that you don't even notice until you're compensating for it. You have to hold the whole thing you're inside in your head, while your body's in space. If anyone was made for it it was her.

When the cop car came up - from the other direction - Sophie would remember four or five times a day she had





started humming 'Fast Car' and didn't realize until she was hailing it down.

They drove her all the way to the Maltby 522 industrial park, where Delilah had tried to shake the cops at the very last opportunity before crossing the 522 onto Paradise Lake Road where there would be nowhere left to turn. It was, as expected from her, a plan that could have worked. The loop around the park would have brought her right back to Yew way in a matter of minutes; if they realized they'd lost her they would assume she'd gotten on the 522 highway, rather than the dark narrow road into the woods. It was real movie finale territory, endless material for feints and reversals - garages, storage crates and above all cars everywhere, wrecks piled up around Bobby Wolford Trucking & Demolition, Rainbow Towing. She had pulled in more than half an hour before Sophie had arrived. They never figured out, or released exactly where she hid.

When the cops slowed to crawl the park systematically, she should have been stone free - they couldn't accelerate as fast as her. She tore onto 87th Ave Elm - and panicked at the headlights from the Maltby Cafe parking lot across the street, swerving into Mid Mountain Con-







struction, a real wheel catching on a sand pit, swung into a container wall.

Privateer Press released a statement on Facebook the next day that confirmed a number of these details since it was right next door and she was pictured at one of their fan events, which I had dragged her to, although I wasn't in the picture.

That sounded like a Disney villain death but he didn't even die, just freefell through the Lung for a bit until he was picked up by an atmospheric management drone like a dragonfly. Which he tried to hijack but those had been deliberately Weirproofed since some minor conflicts with Contemplation's anti-Meteorological holdouts thousands of years ago.

The Servant of Possibility was dealt with by the Weirs. Pheasant Star (an ancient Chinese word suggested by Bennett-Fog that maps somewhat to the Weir word, referencing a different lifeform, for a comet that spreads out like a bird's foot) was confined to a "punishment body": what looked like a three-pointed ribcage, a tree of hooked bone. For Bashtaev on our end we conducted a





brief show court martial and officially had him executed, his body returned to the Ahasurunu as a human autopsy specimen. In fact, he agreed to be injected with a chemical from the Towers' gift (Edison Lens already had their own, but wanted to test the local equivalent), put in a coma and returned to the computer for study, as recompense for our trespass on their body. It was what Anashirana would have wanted, they reassured me, and from our one interaction I wouldn't have been surprised.

In a weird way it was comforting. When I first thought of Delilah's death writing this I thought of Anashirana's, the sudden horrible extinction of a star, but now I realize Bashtae's could have been another sickening echo - another queer who found a way to escape everything pursuing them except the thing that isn't a thing, the bullet that exists for them to bite. Another person eaten by a nightmare, not the kind that can gnaw on someone's soul until they're nothing but a vessel for power but the kind that eats you in one bite, body and all.

A lot of marginalized people talk about not wanting to be "tragic" and I've never gotten it - I mean that was the BL I grew up reading, and I probably needed it to not assign my "practical" fears of the rails infinite value (the





cowardice my parents passed off as strength). But I think people associate that word with like, sad music and out of context names on the news, not actual tragedy, not the narrative that imbues this kind of thing with the dignity it needs to not be utterly pathetic, a word that once meant the same thing and underwent the same emotional erosion. Like “sympathy” and “empathy” or whatever. If we appreciated that properly, I think I once told Delilah out of a particularly contrarian K-hole, we’d have the kind of people who could start revolutions by setting themselves on fire like in the rest of the world, not people who think what’s really revolutionary is “surviving” by burrowing into the most “harmless” office job at an arms contractor. I could wonder if she took that too much to heart but probably every one of us had a thing like that anyway. But it’s not an accident that after she crashed, Mai and I both lost the will to make either compromise. We couldn’t accept doing anything to survive, but we couldn’t accept doing anything to follow what we wanted either, so we wavered and wasted and prayed. And now I’m here.

Now I’m here, my survival mandated by something bigger than me, and my bullet has thousands, millions of living shields.





YUCIGISI  
AEG  
TUCS2  
VCCN2M  
MVECEM2  
AIGENBU  
COMMOD  
NIG2  
CVV2DV  
PCIVICE2  
22E  
202LENDI  
I2SM  
0012  
MIG2DV  
MVEN  
D0G0VE  
EI  
TUV0VE  
M1 01  
TMCIDIDN  
IENFOR  
EIG2M0D  
2ED DO  
MC EG11'  
V0I1I2CI  
I0V  
COM2ECIE  
MVE1'  
211  
D0G0V  
I2SM  
T0VEN





2'  
LUCIGI21  
AET  
FUCS2  
VCCSM20W  
WRECEM02  
AUCLEVV0  
CUMW00  
A.202  
EVAID0'  
PUBICE2  
23E  
202LEMD1  
120W  
0012  
VUID00'  
WVEM0  
D0G0RE  
E1  
F0V0RE  
W1 01  
IWCIDID0  
LEW0R  
E102W0B  
2E1 00  
WE EG11'  
V01512C1  
10W  
C0W2EC1E  
WWE1'  
211  
D0G0R  
120W  
F0V0R





by: ghosted van

Miho (Yuka<sup>TM</sup>)

--how would SHE even know???



-that TL was the crux of Aurachne's initial onslaught on the Queen's Gardens, though that was one layer above clear decrypha. if you map within the centre you can get to a pocket node of our girl's poetry on the subject

---for that to be true  
al-classing Seer and

h



2'  
LUCIG121  
AET  
FVCS2  
VCCN2M  
WPECENV2  
WLEENBV  
LUMODO  
L 202  
EVAIDV  
P1V1CE2  
23E  
202FEND1  
1120M  
0N12  
V110BV  
WVEMV  
D0FORE  
E1  
FVBORE  
11101  
1WC1D1D  
1ENFOR  
E120M

coriolis. I was doing it wrong, praying the wrong way. I'm bathed in the glow of it now.

S -okay, so it's clear she's  
I talking about timeline epsi-  
gl lon. they say there's some-  
ey thing going on in the far  
ey reaches of that universe. a  
ta storm of digitalis that put it  
cl off the grid. no one knows  
al what's going on there. is it  
Ea possible something can get  
to Cerviel from there? if so  
Th would that be good or bad  
th

he she'd be du-  
Luce lmao

at  
you much longer. And I am kept here,  
awa

are still flowing, in the cold a slow burn down  
ks. It would mean it all to me, if I knew you could  
(wish you would listen, I know you should listen.)  
s black as ever but one day, maybe, I will see my-  
white static] See what I look like from outside,  
he face that steals into me, for all these seasons

changelog



pooling 'cross m  
everyone else sees

-in this notation, bloodscript  
transmission a user "The Wren" has attempted  
ea"), recorded on to condense the Cosmere's pres-  
ent turmoil as she sees it with  
her always-limited powers of  
poetry.

coastered out: to the uninitiated, coastered out refers to a Seer fucked up on something and "coastering" the motions. her pretentious use of inslang without explanation will keep the whole narrative obtuse for mind-eyes outside our little brood





-unspun: saying she has gone straight to the source, the dreamweaves of the Fates, ancestral mothers of the Grey Sisters.

--ah who cares. no one takes this bxtch seriously



----im with them. firsthand material  
would be better.

-----Lol that user is lol



2'  
LVCIG121  
AET  
TVCN2  
VCCN120H  
HRECEM02  
HRECEM02  
COMODO  
H.202  
EVAID04  
P1V1CE2  
23E  
202FEND1  
1120H  
0012  
011004

ing gone

0010R  
1120H  
1000R

*changelog*



## *Synopsis*

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections still travel between the thousand strands of data between us



## *Last Time*

Hexa escapes dream-slavery to the starpaths where Lesia, on a dangerous mission for the Patrons to the stabs of technodeath, intersects with Chere

2'  
LVCIG121  
AET  
FVCS2  
VCCSM20W  
HRECEM02  
PCLERRV  
CMMODO  
H.202  
EVAIDV'  
PFBICES2  
23E  
202FEMD1  
1120W  
0012  
VFI00V'  
WVEMV  
D0FORE  
E1  
FVBORE  
W1 01  
IWCIDID0  
LEF0R  
E102W0D  
2E1 DO  
WE EG11'  
VDFI2C1  
10W  
C0W2EC1E  
WHE1'  
211  
D0F0R  
1120W  
F0WEM





CW: drugs (fictional), overdose, withdrawal, magical thinking, hallucination, dehumanized demographic (fictional), police equivalent

VERSE 5

NEONATE

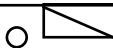
Chère wakes up freezing, clothes soaked, a broken choker bleeding trauma into her brain. Her skin is still numb, her blood starting to thaw and flow. There's a staying dream in her eyes, a clinging whisper in her head.

She picks herself up, webs her halo of hair as neat as she can, her black tee draped over goose-bumped skin paling with cold. They say the latest holic chokers have temp stabilization, but you should only need that if...

If, she thinks, they get you.



***BECAUSE OF TIME WE HOLD OUR BREATH (Σ)***



People notice, she thinks, when your heart is that much colder; no mellow in the world can help that out. If that much had happened, if it hadn't been trauma tripping, she'd been tripping with the Ghouls. With them she'd intersected with a simulation. A simulated alter.

*She's found herself alone.*

She needs to get this shit off and get dry. She emerges from her Habitexa into the waiting Post-Sprawl. It's late-day, the grid laden with auto-cars and passerby, hot steam rising from the *nabeyaki* being served by the bowl by two wizened crones banded beneath hair, over skin in spirals, straining vapour and scent into their own private trips.

She thinks for the price of some *nabeyaki* she could get in their good graces. Hot food. Even from here the scent of burnt foam attacks her nostrils.

Chère reads the crones. She thinks there would be anger there, insult, hidden. Anger in the lines at time's furrows stored from before the Machine Gun Nukes were deployed.

"Poor thing," the crone beside her says. "She's been frost-burnt."



The other makes a *tsk* sound.

"Just look at her. Put it on the house." She vanishes into the back. "She wants our steam," the first crone calls out to her.

"Of course she does."

Chère palms her credit-chip and wonders how much she's got left. The first crone shows her behind the counter. In the steam of the kitchen her heart skips a few beats. The steam here is all broth from cradled pots, the second crone flitting from pot to pot like a moth with attention-deficit. Lances of halogen bathe the kitchen in a dim glow.

She tries to keep her distance. From far enough away they might not be able to tell she's overloaded. That her choker is broken.

In the haze of the broth steam and the pounding of ultra chemical massage time is skipped, spliced. The two crones are facing her. They're on either side of her, holding her up. Through the sounds of the Post-Sprawl faded out she pictures it now, structured through hard-format networks stacked one on top of the other. The surface and below and heaven and hell on top of that.







2'  
LVCIGI21  
AET  
GVCN2  
VCCN20W  
WPECENV2  
AUCENNV  
CQWODD  
A.202  
EVAIDV  
PTVIBICE2  
22E  
202FEND1  
120W  
0N12  
VTIDNV'  
WVENV  
DGTORF  
E1  
FVBORE  
W1 01  
IWCIDIDN  
LENLOR  
E102WOD  
2E1 DO  
WE EG11'  
VDI12C1  
10W  
COWSECE1E  
WHE1'  
211  
DGTORF  
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FVORW

Though the warmth carpets her a distilled fever remains. She'll wake up broken for them to see, if she passes out now. They shepherd her towards where they sleep. A mattress made up so she can only tell when she's beneath the blankets that it's worn in, grooved. Firm against her back and what light reaches her here aches.

She shuts her eyes against it.





## PALLAS

When Chère wakes she's alone again. Light hangs from a tireless dawn through a slanted window. The room is grey EZ-Crete but made up with shrines on either side, candles burning vigil to half-smiling portraits.

She smells singed air and thinks it's from the candles until she gets that it's steam from the hot pots close by. Just beyond the room she's in. Thin current trails hang in the streak of dawn-light.

She pushes the blankets aside. She's in new clothes now, a robe, sleeping pants. Grotesque cooking pads lay by the mattress, askew to each other.

She pulls them on and heads towards the kitchen, where she halts by the door. A crone, maybe the first, maybe the second, she isn't sure, stirs the pot, humming a soft song that breaks off the moment she stops.

"Where are my clothes?" she says.

"Pinned out back," the crone in the kitchen says. She looks Chère over, her gaze as if falling like snow across the white of Chère's cloth. "What's your name?"





She lowers her head in acknowledgement. "I'm Chère."

"I'm Miho," the crone says. "Out front is Yuka. Your stuff's probably dry by now."

Chère nods.

"If anything kills you," Miho says, "it'll be that thing around your neck. That thing's not under license." Miho gestures from her shoulder with her left arm, her right still stirring the pot, tracing loose crescents and spiralling the steam.

"Make sure your stuff's okay. Always make sure."

She forces herself through the kitchen. The floor is smooth. Lacquered or varnished. Her cooking pads clunk over it. The smell of pork and beef broth makes her decide to ask Yuka what happened to her order.

The astralagic trip descends, strung on sleep beams that still poke holes of trauma corrosion into her sight. Her heart sinks. With a broken choker it's a clincher that she'll pick the worst option.

Still she runs it through anyway. Right hand path: under the sign of Ares, claim food as spoils of experience. Left





hand path: under the sign of Pallas Athene, get your armour before the battle begins.

In the trauma holic overload she gropes in vain for some semblance of a tether to each choice. Finds in the dance of blood to the song of her heart white blood cells murmuring against the knits of her platelets. But in her dream she'd heard the same murmur, turned up, and she could hear what it was saying.

She leaves Yuka unhassled and follows the light out back. She finds a small yard enclosed by walls like carapaces of tread tanks minus the treads. Here the grass is pale, shaded by an overhang slab. But enough sun has made it through to dry the damp from her clothes. She takes in the view; a small fountain at the end of the yard, carved into the far wall. Watercress strings the rippling pool.

In the gloom beneath the slab the water is like murk.

She dresses by it. Hearing its ebb and gurgle. A few strewn coins glint beneath the surface, the light scarring the surface film as she sweeps her gaze over it. As she dresses her body moves and her brain keeps track, beneath the pumping holic the two conduits lightyears from each other.



She begins to retreat from the gloom when she hears the fountain moan. That same ragged timbre, more gasp and throat than sound.

She finds Miho again.

"You're housing Ghouls out there," she says. Rubbing her neck, her choker, and chewing her lip.

Miho squints. For a moment even takes her eyes off the hot pot to cradle them onChère's own. "I'm sure you're here to lecture me on the dangers of Ghouls."

She isn't sure what to say. Not legal, sure, but she isn't about to narc. "They're bad news. Forgotten children of the Frost. We shun them for a reason." Gripping the frame of her choker as if she could tear it away from her then and there. They led me to those that made them.

Miho shakes her head. "Insincerity is an unkind trait, child." As if waiting forChère to tell her all of it but she doesn't. After some silence, she shakes it again. "Go see Yuka out front. She'll tell you the terms of repayment."

"I was getting,"Chère says, "around to it." She fights off a second shrug and bows instead. Then she wanders to the





counter, taking her time, slow measured steps against the sudden sieve of dawnlight.

Outside the street is sluggish. People sparse the street, most elders out for a morning walk, blinking into the sun. In the nukeworld frontiers the dogs stretch, she thinks, set off for scavenge. Yuka isn't dealing with anyone. She stands with a palm to her chin, elbow planted to the counter.

"I grabbed my clothes," Chère says.

"You had clothes already," Yuka says. "You needed food."

Chère sighs. "Let me guess "

"It's gone. The guy who took off with it, you could smell from space. Even through the steamstrain."

"That was fucked," Chère says. "She told me..." But she trails off. A lesson here, she thinks, if I can learn it. People will say things that could mean anything.

Yuka nods. An absent motion that wavers her cradle arm slightly, the cloth of her loose sleeve falling, wristbones gnashing the dry air. She says, "you got a plan? To deal with your problem?"



The countertop is a glazed grey, with the specials displayed via hanging poster from above in twin languages. Chère thinks about edging around, reading them, ordering again.

"It's not fair," she says.

Yuka grins. "Fair would be another frostburnt valley doll found hypo'd in the press. That's fair to everyone. It's supposed to happen."

"So you know," Chère says. "People aren't gonna hang with a doll that could wig out. I need something else."

The crone regards her. "You can work here, if you want. Miho and I could use the help. We can rig your choker up in exchange." Before Chère can respond she shakes her head. "Don't you have friends?"

Sure, she wants to say. The voice of my coma. The ghost I could hear when the Giants were doing their thing. My coma friend. For the silence in her head is stark now, the signal severed, the source DOA.

"I'm not sure," she says.

In the light Yuka's face is polished paler, for this moment a blank slate, like the sun washing over marble sculpture,





despite the weathering composed, vibing to all and sundry forever.

Chere looks away.

Yuka's voice is soft, spinning out to her, reaching her, at all other points dissolving to phantom space. The words you hear, and then they go, and you go, Chère thinks. But they are alive where they were never heard. Telling her to go to the back and pester Miho about the rig-up. All she can do through the holics is string life from contact point to contact point.

The fire from that beyond life, that charred imprint of her, the knowledge she's fucked up somewhere. Who knows what shit you can pick up scraping against the Forest for too long? The seeds she laid there will blossom through her astralagic choices.

She goes, her stomach growling.





## TO ANY WHO WOULD EVER PERISH

So Miho and Yuka are to her right and left but together, equidistant from her, Chère can't remember who was which. Miho, she labels the one to her left, Yuka the one to her right. All three tuning their steam strains but of course she's the most desperate. They'd modded the choker into a MK II. stitch-band, but without guidance she sees her success rate down the astrological line as 0%. They're laddling out front, dosing the Holics from the invoked steam, the sanctified noodle broth a byproduct of the invocation ritual. The crones tell her the path of the Steam-Strainer comes with both peril and reward. The peril is total dissolution into the void's negative. The reward, she's told, has something to do with her immortal soul. Straining information from the crones is practice for sifting through the steam itself.

She stirs in an absent mind. A couple is sloping their way to the stand, eyes vitro-dyed lilac and violet, as if made for each other. When they talk to her first and not Yuka or Miho, it intrudes; she's confused for a second. They want to split a large bowl. It's all comfy, she thinks. Their structure, she's learned, is commensalist: it doesn't harm the larger Belly.





The well-yard out back still isn't maintained. The Ghouls they host hate cropped growth the way they hated themselves to let themselves decay in the first place. The kitchenware is low-line; stainless steel they're careful with, boiler cores off-shelf some Hap-Mart. They know their way around their strainer bands, so she figures one-time fee or DIY'd. They could be storing up credit for some crisis.

She's never seen them paranoid. In fact she thinks they don't worry enough. The yard opens to the sky and is hemmed in by low structure. Any mapgrid archive would have scanned the grounds. Waiting for some archive surfer to notice, and after that waiting for another to care. Two short steps down the line. If she saw that in her trip she'd have a shit-fit.

Miho tells her to get some more from the kitchen. As she passes there the chatter between the couple and the crones fades but doesn't break. Follows her as she makes her way through the short hall of rebar-enforced EZ-Crete, the makeshift entrance part of the facade that they have painted a gloss black and furling from the Belly that the crones have scabbled their dwelling into. They are not off its main brocade into the grid; this is a side street, and those who approach them are Cluster locals. A Belly is named





for the bell effect that blurs together slews and slews of zoning program permits into mounds like moss bubbles on the grid-line. Silhouetted like some giant bug's nest sac. So in this way it's like EZ-creting yourself to a giant whale. What is to the symbiote in the water a huge mass of warmth. Churning warmth, centre mass. As she winds to the kitchen she gets closer, then further away.

She hears faint murmurs from the backyard well. That pocket that is a thin sliver into space. Up high enough they are separated from the nuke-world frontiers by force field barriers spewed by arching emitters. But the angle cuts off the emitters; all you can see from the backyard would be a ripple in the sky were the force field to adjust its frequency. From where she is that would be a short walk but she thinks if she doesn't listen to Miho and Yuka she'll lose it. Find herself scrambled into the Belly or worse into the greater grid with its stacked layers and dimensions. The Frost that gets in despite every frequency update has already gotten to her. The dust of a nuclear winter swept in from the frontiers settles in you until you are seeing them, fearing them through the glass. When enough have seen them they are talked about, studied, and some had chosen to atrophy to Ghouls.





She hated the holic choker but reworked into a steam-strainer band it's not so bad. Still she thinks what had snapped it had been the Death Forest getting closer, in a new guise in the world of the Ghouls and how they have dissipated to union with the decay, how they can live in water, in any area wet or fetid. She knew that when she was past the golden light, knew she was water then.

The golden light was a transubstantiation. When she had been water she had reached out and she had talked to a second presence.

She hopes on the right dose of strained holics she can do it again.

She retrieves the noodle from the pot which still burns a little to the touch. Leaves a small white mark on her fingertip. Later it goes and she forgets it but she studies it now. A slim bolt of white parallel to her fingernail's edge. She now pairs her Valley Doll fit with the grotesque cooking pads. She's flipped the fit's black hologram to silver-grey, a purple logo of a thrash-core outfit that had probably been image ganked from the first cloud it found. She shrugs, dons mitts, and brings the ladled bowls out one by one while back there Miho and Yuka shoot the shit. When she's done she gives a lazy wave and is met with two



single raised eyebrows, flashed one after the other by the crones while never breaking from their talk. She doesn't care.

She's going to the well.

In the late afternoon the sky patched through where the EZ-Crete graft splits for it is nacreous and grey, the air in the cloistered yard still. Cobbles of stone are arranged since she's been here like a garden but the weeds that crawl into vine and throttle the sides are untamed, strong. She pokes through them, careful of barbs. She can hear the sound of the grid beyond the walls, the dusk-life primed this time of day and if she strains, echoes chambered within the Belly. Footsteps, sounds of people moving shit around. She hears these as she draws near the well but from the well itself she hears nothing. Where before she'd heard movement, the water rippling from deep in the font, even in the leavening air.

"Hello?" she says to the gulf. That presence, she thinks, is in the water, past the golden light.

Silence greets her. The well could be dead, she decides. She could have heard anything while her choker was on overload.





Still the crones didn't deny it when she asked them.

She lingers there, in the fading light. The gloom is a pall like a curse of silence before Miho and Yuka break it up, the one she'd named Miho holding a small paper lantern. As it washes over the well the light sweeps out each crook in stonework, each vein of grimed paste and shadow, where the weeds have grown to clamber up and curl over into abyss. The dusk-life has hushed, and from within the Belly all is quiet. The one she'd named Miho is grinning, the one she'd named Yuka pensive, lips flat, neutral. Both are hooded as if cold. Ancient Steam-Strainer lore: keep the heat in. So they say.

She says, "you haven't taught me the good shit yet."

"We told you impatience was unkind," her Yuka says. "You know why?"

"You told me it was insincerity," Chère says. "So I was sincere. Sincerely slaved my ass away for you two."

Her Miho rasps a giggle. The other chews her lip. Her Miho's hair is shorter, Chère decides, by half an inch. Both modified bucket cuts, lopsided. Her Miho often draws hers



back but now it spills into her face, making it hard for Chère to tell the two apart.

"I'm still lost in it," she says, meaning: the astrological trip. She doesn't say it. Because now she hears it is in vogue to turn away; the whole maze a nightmare-mode for life. She had kept her ear to talks like these but never engaged. Listened with one ear cocked like a radar tower through all the holics she was dosing. So instead she gestures to the well. "You haven't told me what's really down there, either."

They stare at her.

"Because you think your time has some secret worth, because it belongs to you. But all time is stolen," her Miho says, in breath, in whisper. "Borrowed," the other crone says. "Same thing," says her Miho.

"I can tell," Chère says "I know." Her old life bleeds back into the past and still the cut is raw and open. Still it stretches further back. Like being strapped, she thinks, to the gurney as the ceiling tiles swim by. A mess of faces with requests, demands. Now over. So the well is all that is, with its silence clawing at the stillness and both of





them eating away at her. Clinging to the gloom flush with absence but for the three figures engulfed by the weeds.

“What do you hear?” says her Yuka. The question is taunting if still dreamy, muttered out. Metered with emphasis. What. Do. You. Hear. She isn’t sure herself because it’s subjective. The heartbeat of the world, she wants to say, is its stillness, that thuds once an epoch, a back-beat for immortals. To any who would ever perish infinite, nameless silence. That’s what I hear. The heartbeat of the world.

She knows Yuka would tell her she isn’t hearing shit until she learns to listen. The only way out is silence. Long habits and routines. Knowing when to spell gaps of silence matters as much as filling them. Yuka frowns, Miho laughs and she knows she’s won somehow. She names them then, peering into wrinkle patterns, probing with her eyes the banded slopes of their foreheads. To discern them from each other. In the holic ocean, ebbing but still half-alive, where two are more complex than three, one the most incomprehensible of all. Miho. Yuka. She assigns them. Because it doesn’t matter, she thinks, if the coin flips and each is lost behind the other. She couldn’t tell, not when she met them. She was too wiggled out.

“Let’s get some sleep,” Miho says. “Tomorrow we go outside.”





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## AELENCAM

She's woken early. There's no light to tell by but the candle flame but she vibes it. Yuka makes her vibe it, the force of her nudging gathering in intensity. Her eyes themselves are half-veiled by sleep.

"What's the rush?" Chère says. Then she has an insight. "Is it the creeps?" she says, meaning Shin Five Zero. Short for Shinobi Five Zero, the sprawl-funded answer to its technical absence of laws. In the bowels of their gene sequencing vaults Shinobi are coded to directives. They have their conscience backspaced out. Creeps, though, you'd never see coming.

They wouldn't spare us, she thinks, unless told to.

"Better prices this early," Yuka says. Chère hears the sound of water boiling, a distant hiss of steam. Not from the kitchen but some room she can't see and has never made her way to. She thinks it's where Miho and Yuka sleep now, if they don't drift the rooms of the Graft, haunt them like ghosts.

"Is that for me?" she says.



Yuka shakes her head.

“What’s all this for, really?” Chère says. Pushing the sparse sheet off her, to the side, hoisting herself off the mattress.

Yuka shakes her head again, as if to say it doesn’t matter.

Her shoes are where she’s left them, paired parallel beside the bed. Just staring at the silent well and turning over if she had named the two right had tired her. Because if I haven’t, she thinks, that skews the astrological trip where it concerns them. I started out losing, too.

*I would have looked dead in the alley.* A vacant body. Behind coma eyes the Giants had shaped themselves from brain channel contours dusted with nuclear residue. Past the golden light with her wires crossed. *The Giants we see in glass but the Ghouls are light in water.* She shudders, somehow still cold.

She wraps her arms around her shoulders as she paces out of the room and then it hits her.

The Steamweavers have taught her. Sift the chemstuff from deep where its ghost hides in tufts of steam. Where the energy of life has coiled, trenchant; it sleeps as if safe





from her. Steam-straining suspends the puppet dance of flesh burning its way to grief or that's what Miho and Yuka tell her. Pushes it far from the soul. The soul enslaved to hunger is furtive, wastes energy trying to hide.

"It's about the Death Forest," she says, "isn't it. The reason I was on holics in the first place. You've seen it too."

She remembers, memories of dreams like petals of flowers picked, the parts you forget all stem. What matters is what sticks with you. She'd let someone down. She made a promise but hunger had pulled her awake.

"She called it the Death Forest," she hears Yuka say. Miho is humming, her voice threading faint exalt, stirring as if with faith and joy. As if finding a tune for a prayer that's been running through her head. She pauses then as she exits the room. She's laden with a satchel bag, in hazel, in the light sallow like bad cream. Yuka emerges a moment later, fussing over her, asking her if she's got everything. Chère stares at the two.

"We call it Aelencah," says Miho. She looks at Yuka. Yuka backs off. "It's metaphysical residue from the MG Nukes. It's death blooming, we think, death as the magnetic dust between things changing. Corroding. The more you purify



your soul, the closer you come to it; the stuff that veils it is gauze, bandage dressing.”

Chère still sees it, pulls it from her memory, picking flowers. Branches swathed with dark leaves. A cold wind through them and the aether clinging to the mattes blotting the sky had blanched furrows with white specks like pollen. The leaf-skin was crisp and had shot underfoot, gouged the silence with a sound like ice cracking.

The ether was a steady drift of hybrid cig smoke, the toxins left deemed inert enough to be of no great concern to the mass dream of the astrological trip. True seekers of the way can avoid them if they want.

In the Post-Sprawl, though, mornings are great clouds of them knotted together by collective exhaustion. Waking up is hard to do. This is something felt by the Post-Sprawl in the bone, in the sleeping depths, and when the sleepers rise they spill it out with themselves into the dawnlight. The rises peak in brambles of steel losing themselves where the irradiated sky has choked off all growth. Back then they were THE Sprawl, the highest population cluster. They were the ones that deployed the MG Nukes. There had been a few seeded here and there at key pop points





with the plan they'd plume out, join each other, re-fabricate the planet through massing enclaves of hyper-tech.

It didn't work out.

Now in THE Post-Sprawl that is left over the nuke-world is a place to be charted and mapped. They use stitch-bands, Miho had told her, like theirs; they don't leave it to chokers. They corrode too easily, as she'd found out. They know dogs live out there, black dogs with eyes either fiery green or like amber. They've met merchants with grey, tattered skin bundled in cloth. The Colo-Refs are half exiles, half public service workers. No one wants to do it but the program is funded so it gets done right. A claustrophobia's descended over all of them; she's felt it in the astrological trip, in the choices funnelled to her.

They have yet to encounter a living thing with any real tech. The dogs look well fed, their fur sleek, shining. They don't attack unless threatened. There's always one or two around, on their haunches staring with features that would look composed, blase, if not for the glow. They scavenge something, out there in the rad. Over the black vein stretches of the old roads where the desert winds wail with the sound of ghosts. Still all that is far away, and before





she was double sequenced far, cloistered in her Habitexa so all that was awful would fade away.

"There's someone you're looking for," Yuka says with a glare that could mask a probing nature. Could mask to anyone but Chère who'd turned pro at social routines. Before Aelencah was a name to her it was closer then. Such people can be curious and bury it under scorn, gouge away at the thing until all is clear. "You mentioned it."

She guesses she had. In the searing Post-Sprawl dawn thoughts are stifled, on usual to narrow to the next holic fix of any kind and where it's coming from. She talked about it with her friends when she had them. When she would rove. With Miho and Yuka she's more cramped. She supposes returns are like this, always bought cheap. Now she stares into Yuka's face, her arched brow. "So?" she says. "Should I expect to find them here?"

She thought Miho was too far to eavesdrop, but the crone breaks in. "In a way."

Yuka grins, a cruel smile. "We'll move faster if we split up."

Miho says, "our girl isn't city-broken yet."





Chère faces both of them.

"I'm fine." Fine because she's happy to be here. Fine because it's all for sale. The Hypermall is more given to crystalline growth than sac-like smoothness. It lurks, like some great beast sleeping, a few corners down, and she can see it from here. The growths where neon signage has worked itself into barbs that hook and serrate the low skyline. Built so that it defines the streets in a steady light like lamplight falling. She sees the signs like she saw the Miho and Yuka's paper lanterns; the light cowers beneath the shade; it trembles there like she trembles in her own skin. Still before she thought this way she'd always seen the Hyper-Mall signage as hidden flame. The neon light hides beneath the halogen, never burns out. As if it's all plugged in and not going anywhere but by now it should be signal. They reside in a cloistered excess and MG Nuked anyone they had to share the energy with. Cables can be tampered with.

"This is the list," Yuka says. "Don't fuck with it." The list rhymes off item by item in sloping font that could be either of them. She goes down the list. Holic polymers. Gluants. Isogel. These three are in heavy print as if traced into again and again. Then: Proteins. For food or some-







thing else she isn't sure. Then she realizes she can't stand around all day reading it, not right in front of them.

"Sure," she says. "Easy ease." She's walking away. Their eyes are fixed on her, she can tell, by the way her nape-down bristles. The back of her neck faces east, towards the ascending meridian, which a second ago she'd stared into, glowing in fringe around the firmfoam exostructure of the Belly. Swept away from it as the streets crook. She was swept as sooner or later, she thinks, all of us are funnelled, drawn into tangling criss-cross paths, meeting where there is no centre. The neon signage of the Hypermall shines on her too, and for a second, it's a relief. There's always a next time, she thinks, as she slips from view, as the neon channels looped all around her braid, burn cold, steady, sure.





## L.A. GODS

The chem shop is embedded within the Hypermall and resides in a subsurface layer. The lower you get there are more Ghouls around. Hanging ragtag in scatters of three or four. These now avoid her eyes, she'd think, but isn't sure. She avoids theirs, avoids their bodies gaunt beneath tattered clothes and gauze, so she can't tell. The Hypermall interior isn't EZ-Crete but feels like hard plaster, structure laced with veins of candy coloured glass. The glass itself was molten and spread like butter through the high-grade stuff the pro builders use. It would be a process, she thinks, with policy. When it was everyday to her she never thought about it much.

Now the veins pop from the plaster the way ice shines under a blanching moon. Pops off even more in the streaking light which crashes in from a thousand displays and the in-mall BG is tuned to braise glowing or glinting things and ram them into the prefrontal. A gloom that would be sombre, a dying daylight, if it didn't bring to flame all the branding she could handle. So that she reaches in her jeans for the list which a moment ago she'd thought of tossing. Chucking anywhere to watch it be engulfed. Impossible to litter in Hell, she thinks. Too much fire.



Deeper underground the lights shine as if infused with fresh energy wired from the heart of the earth. The layout is a maze of hallways that shift with each new choice the Hypermall's Omnarchitect makes. Omnarchitects are ever-present; rumor has it they are dug in to the Hypermall foundry and left there like vacant bodies. Local area gods. They run the LAN and can re-sequence the corridors that are modded with grey-gloop. What matters isn't where they are but how they control the network. Her makeshift holic stitch-band has reserves built up while she was standing still, straining, just breathing. They aren't infinite.

When the spliced Crete sets it's as if the ever-glow of the brand franchising is baking it into a stillness, a moment of veneration ruined by its next re-sequence. These breather moments replicate the feel of ancient malls but astrological tripping within one is a severe crime with severe come-back. They can't punish you with fines because tripping within the Hypermall will put you in the red. Blood from a stone then. So instead to deal with the astralogs they mandate shifting halls; not life-threatening as all halls lead to safety in the end, but blurring out the astrological trip. Blurring out what they've all come to think of as a little technicolor mixed in with the greys of post-MG Nuke-life.





With steamweaving comes some threading, a meta-spell that works like the rope of Theseus. She hasn't had time to master this. Still she envisions a vague semblance of a you-are-here. Lines congruent, spots flicker in and out, representing spaces she can get to with a good chance of housing the chem shop. A shifting mindmap is the best she can do. The hall resequencing could be a bored Omnarchitect hammering the switch in their brain that says action. If she gets lucky they could get bored of being bored.

The chem shop is more a sterile room like the inside of an asylum than something that looks legit. A few sparse displays imply the good shit is in the back. She's used to this. Anyone and everyone is if they need the white market. Walk into the store and see vials, glass; but what's in them could be talcum or high grade baking soda. This puts the fixer in the mood for action while at the same time puts it further away from them. Makes them desperate but there's no law against it and she wonders who would step up to the Omnarchitects to enforce it if there was. Within the Hypermall's shifting grey facets no one can touch them. *Post-MG we savour every word.* She's used up some reserve charting the halls which were changing the way people change their minds. Omnarchitects are prone to mood swings. She would be, too, if the rumors are true.



There's a girl here but she looks half-asleep. Fine eyebrows glint through shellac white glasses. She's slumped, nesting a chin in one arm, elbow planted on the stainless steel counter-top. As Chère comes in the girl peers at her, her chin slipping at first from her palm with a careless grace as she tilts her head. Chère figures she knows the list by heart now and is thinking about the crash later. The girl stares at her, the words who are you and what the hell are you doing here freezing on her lips and left unsaid. They attack Chère still from the girl's bespectacled eyes before the girl comes out of it. Instead she says, "Uh, yeah. Can I get you anything or are you just looking?"

Chère almost lets it all go. Breezes right back out of there. The fierce lighting begins to hurt her eyes. In here it clumps like the sprawl, nowhere to run from it. Then she decides she needs a reason to be here and figures what the hell. She gropes for the list and comes out with it. It catches there in a beam of deep blue light tinted with fuchsia, one of many which strobe the room, coming in through where the facade is glass for the entrance and its frame. Caught in the beam the paper is translucent like parchment.





"We don't carry any of that weird shit," the girl says, Chère thinking, what, and then she gives a lingering wink. "Is what they tell me to tell you I'm told to say."

Chère still doesn't get it. Then she looks down.

In the hybrid blue-orange of the light new items have appeared, slashed over the script she could see in the creeping dawn of the Post-Sprawl streets.

**serpent slime crystal, powdered**

**ash bark resin, bloodcharged**

**palm leaf resin, consecrated**

**bird feather**

**incense (caked)**

"Oh," Chère says.

"Right this way," the shopgirl says, and with lean, pale arms, guides her to the back.



## ALL THAT REMAINS

The back sprawls into a room larger than the showcase. The light here is softened vanilla and the halogen is arranged in metric sequence, spreading light like cream around the chamber in even measures. "Once shadow enters," she hears the shop-girl say, "this shit can kick off. Its all been hexed and blessed a thousand times, it's clock-work." She figures. The light outside is too jagged. Even refracted through the glass. "People want fast results." Vials are arrayed in legions marching down lengths of paper-thin table boards. Each labelled with a stamp below, engraved, bolted in. To the sides of the room are crates glued shut with plastic sealant, traces of which remain, teardrop scars or half-stars where they have drooled from the sealing.

"What people don't get," the shop-girl is saying to her, in a you-must-know-this-already voice, "is that this stuff can interface if blessed right. Do all sorts of cool shit with tech."

Chère lets herself nod. "Yeah, people don't know a whole lot." She hopes the shopgirl will expand. "We can reach heaven or hell through this," she says, her eyes dulled out





behind the lenses in the even glaze of light. So Chère is talking to lips, a bobbing nose, hair tresses, ears buried somewhere beneath.

"Most people don't think about signal. They think they do but they're thinking of contact. That's the death of the signal. It's the signal's lifespan we care about. So much can be done with it."

Great, Chère thinks, a high-language vamp and maybe way into her own holics. It's either a bonus, or an allotment from her pay. Up in a tower of concepts and coming down to wind back up. Over and over up and down the tower. The thread in her mind-map is bronzed ochre as if with time. The mind-map itself is scarred with blotches of dead pixel blur.

The shop-girl is roving the room. Pacing it, tapping vials, not taking any. Chère watches her, back and forth. She says, "like what?" Her nerves are acting up. Faint flush roots in tandem lines from her forehead, spirals down her chest beneath her holo-tee as the DIY stitch-band compensates with its steam-strait reserves. The shop-girl doesn't notice.







"You heard of the deathsim's? Back in vogue," she says. Pocket games. Little worlds named with those that disappear. Testament in code of those who were once with... Chère winces. Those games, she used to feel, were for her patrons. Not her. "Yeah," she says. "You mean your holics make the sims better somehow?"

The shopgirl stops. Turns to regard her from behind her table-board, her lenses a white mask. Not glinting in the cream light, but her skin is flaxen with it. She guesses hers is too. "It's obvious you don't know what this stuff is capable of." Her head is skewed. Off-centre her gaze bites at Chère. She's conscious then of the frizzy matted halo of her hair which in the warmth has been stranded to string, itches where it's plastered against her.

"I've never seen you before. Did someone send you here?" Now her voice is tense. Chère thinks of the storefront behind her, the shifting grey-gloop halls, the ochre thread winding away. All that seems fragile now, like even the confusion of it might be lost, swept away into space and time. Swept away like dust and then she'll still be here. Trapped. The shop-girl is pacing towards her. "Was it those DIY ladies? They always send people here to deal with me. They hate me, I think."





"That's lame," Chère says. She has a vision of the shop-girl sleeping, waking up, blowing up. Like moment to moment only freaking out counters each sleep. The eyelids unseal and snap shut again, lacing dream through being. It's a holic, Chère realizes, but she doesn't see a choker or band.

"You know," the shopgirl says, "they want to avoid me." The lens of her glasses seem to set them apart, her a tier above, Chère below, a divide between them parting, once razor-thin, yawning into gulf, swallowing. A gap in their limits. Chère's heel brushes against the outwards door, which had thudded shut.

The power cuts, all the vials lost under the blanket of pitch-black. For a second. They come back as they ignite, one by one, like stars twinkling into a velvet sky.





## BROKEN MANTRAS

From beneath the lenses, shining octaves brighter, her eyes. Twin halos at first, blossoming as dot to iris a steady spiral outwards to the edges of her eyes. Refracted they are green fire against the frame.

Then it's gone. "Oh, you're still here? That was Val. We're linked."

Pinpricks of flame, the vials summon thin echoes of gloss from the varnish of the table-boards. As if scattered snow, the shining traces.

"Why'd they do that?" Chère says. "I just wanna grab what I need."

"It's too late for that," the shopgirl says, but there's a moment of silence. "He had a mood swing. That's okay. I can swing him back up. But we need to get to him. When this stuff ignited it would have fried any sim or carrier in the area." She pauses. "All this is burning out. But he can get more. It's nothing to him."

She sighs. "Okay," she says. "I gotta do this first." She's pushing her way past Chère, where no impact light strobes





in. There's only the gulf of darkness beyond and the crackling reverb drenched scrapings of the grey-gloop halls.

"Any sim?" Chère says, coming out behind her. Probing the words, trying to find the teeth in them. "Pocket games?"

She makes a look, her eyes creasing. "That's how I interface with him. You can reach any overlay through any embedded sim and by now physical presence never wandering or leaving has embedded what sim it's got, *capiche?*"

"That would also," she says, "fry, re-fry I think, all those game-heads who keep them like sigils. They'd be haywire, snowfuzzmoss brains. It'll be like Val to space and let them find us."

Chere thinks of Devon and his games that he'd stressed were like gardens. Cultivation. She'd had another word. Instances. They were not grown; they just were, if flowered of timeless sequence. Time would have no meaning to the straining para-webs that would tangle and knit before they knew to be apart from themselves. To be part of each other, an always-thought, before Chère and she guesses before those before her; what matters is what is contained in you, that you didn't put there, that no one put there.



"You're talking about the carriers," she says, "their carriers. What about the sims?"

"Where does anything go when it is fried," the shop-girl says, "before it comes back." Says it as if the answer to this is both obvious and unknowable. Chère thinks she knows. Steam scouring the charcoal black of the stainless pan. The pan itself was scorched and split when she'd first used it. She'd hurt her finger some. Steam-Straining was like pulling sap from trees to the initiate; to those who know, like the hummingbird swallows nectar. Between those two points there's a threshold where a trust is broken, a bond betrayed. Going against, breaking skin.

She follows by default as the girl ambles behind the counter-top. Retrieves from a burrowed desk cavern a sign upon which she makes several crossings and re-crossings with a pen, Chère assumes. Can't only make out the languid snakes that are her elbowed arms moving with the motion, the pales of her arms slivers in the darkness.

She thinks, a status update for anyone who stumbles in here. Like who? A Ghoul?

Are they friend or foe, out there in the dark?





The shopgirl, though, guides her; the shopgirl has more allotted to her mind-map, or maybe, Chère thinks, she's used to this: the hall straight and clear; the shop-girl stopping her as the grey-gloop sludges before them to section off a new corridor.

“Why would the Omnarchitect let them find us?” Chère says. “Is he that big an asshole?”

A long sigh. “Something in the way he’s wired? Something in the way they’ve left him?” The grey-gloop has hardened into alabaster and now shifting circuits race signage to draw in neon dance the meme-nexii glyphs and branding seraphic fonts of the Hypermall’s motif-patterns, which would correspond to the Omnarchitect’s soul, Chère knows, reaching out. What would he see that he could only translate out of empty promises and become limp wrist, limp flat of hand offered, hand in taking. Lips splitting, asking. The shop-girl’s say: He just crashes, gets real low.

“My friends are gonna wonder,” Chère says, “where the hell I am.”

“Caged bird-ass,” she says, “way of thinking.”



Down the halls they have reached a stairway moving downwards. The greyloop halls have slowed in their sequenced shifts.

Lips splitting to ask, Chère thinks, like everyone asks, but what they ask from you is time, and it's to replace their own, the time lost in their asking for it, the time lost no matter the reason.

The ossified grey-gloop is no longer alabaster but looks like casing steel. Her friend's uncovered a pocket flashlight and sweeps it up and down the turf, though Chère thinks this is for her. The shop-girl never slows when she doesn't need to, perhaps thinking in a weird way that she's on the clock. The pocket light is a cold, clear blue. She wants to tell her that the girl exists enslaved and entombed in a Post-Sprawl variant cap-monolith but thinks better of it. The sweeping light picks up grilles in the ceiling, mesh plating patches on the pockmarked floor. Dirt or dust has accrued in mounds like small anthills or films thin as paper. Like steel shavings, Chère thinks, as she stops to show her. "Grey-gloop leavings," the shopgirl says. "Ghouls don't come here."

"What about feral gamers?" Chère says, eyeing the darkness around them like a wall of mist, the flash-beam hang-





ing loose by the girl's side, beam drilling into the floor, slicing against it as her wrist flickers back and forth in a manner like nervous habit.

Scuffing sounds in the pitch dark.

She flicks the light off, and she's gone, and so are the films and mounds of chrome dust, and all there is a series of murmurs from just beyond, in clipped rhythm, like a promise broken before even being said.



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AEG  
TVCIS2  
VCCN25W  
\*ECCEN2  
N10EBBU  
CUMHDD  
N1202  
CBVOTDU  
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22E  
202LEWBI  
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N1ENB  
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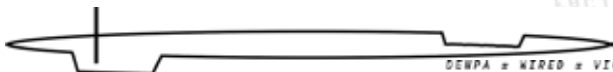






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GENPA \* WIRED \* VIOLENCE

**psyCHOgramma**

ELECTRICA STAGNANS CONSUMMATUM

by: caraparcels

**PSYCHOGRAMMA**

name: reonuxala

bloodtype: ab

likes: forthrightness, romantic convolution, gifts, people who see her often, carcinogenic chemicals

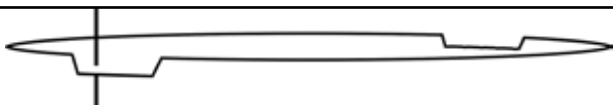
dislikes: claims to have none

seen with: marsa, her clientelle

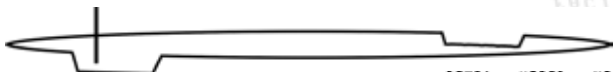


**character profile**

if the professional yet leisurely activities of the megacorps were the major spaces on the wired, hostesses like reonuxala hold buffer zones where much more personal interactions occur with a level of secrecy. something of a ghost or a puppet master with being able to control several avatars at once to interact with her clients on her server to talk, have drinking games, have a meal, or have more intimate relations with. also a model for new fashions that megacorp divisions would bring designs for. while some buke at her use of avatars for intimacy, some of the appeal of some users is to see



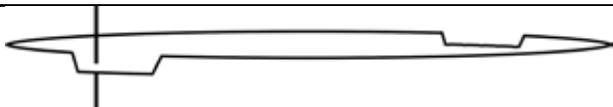




DEWPA \* WIRED \* VIOLENCE  
**psYCHogramm**  
ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

## *Synopsis*

users wander the infinite plazas within their internal os. foxtel, one such user, darts between each of these old worlds disintegrating in electric signals, one bullet at a time.





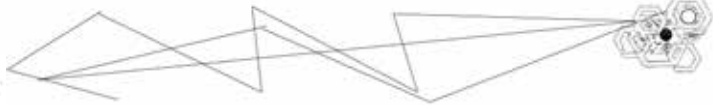
## *Last Time*

foxtel and aleppo follow the otherworldly face that lures its victims to face and lose themselves, uncovering a surprisingly mundane meaning behind the missing persons





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1120W  
0N12  
VU100V  
WUWV  
DOTOVE  
E1  
FVBOVE  
W1 01  
IWCID10N  
LELBOV  
E102W0D  
2E1 DO  
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fluctuations that tremored within faceless high rises that only stood still, our movements past them only lapsed the sunlight into black, this momentary death that precedes the flashes of life.

kunakida sat on a cloud of iron wisps that weaved themselves into a chair as she spun different glimpses into forests and ancient streets from old eras to sketch a new avatar design, sculpting the wireframe, pulling edges of collars from delinquent formalities to the clean flutters of dresses off the knees, this table a particle within her mind that branched out into these boughs where we saw these displaced cities pool into the wired. through the static, the different users at the tables surround a woman avatar of reonuxala, a personality of sorts who makes interactive café servers where her several avatars work as hostesses, her dusky voice that got her audience to lean a little closer but always stopping themselves, bashful only nodding as she asks about another drink or at another table she was in a race-girl outfit with tight leather whose creases that stretched itself smooth across her silken body as she laughed haughtily while her audience also joined in the frivolities in snickers, or she sat with a single user in tank-top looking a little shy but only speaking with only the lightest intonation that falls into a soft breath, each





of these avatars flickering within the glow of the tables like spotlights of on these sketches of a daily life with. reonuxala, this person who could appear to others, beckoning them into some spectacular intimacy within their eyes of even these fragments of a person that pulled us away from the empty streets whose inhabitants haunted the wired with their anxious whispers that juddered in static the flow of signals, until the hem of her robe of that being flickered in the electricity of those heavenly beings . reonuxala herself was never present, or rather her psyche flitted half-interestedly through each avatar, almost in the way of an apparition, a momentary lapse that people who saw her often claimed to have felt her presence brush past the avatar's movements or voice but she herself must have always found exit, perhaps observing all this commotion as a user herself strolling between the ornate columns or sitting on the fountain, the pouring of falls licking the blue surface of the water in this pool of azure days that maybe the place she often stayed. i remember something about a v-idol having a similar story, but then, these stories always reproduced themselves whether in the imperfect retelling of rumours like a vague haze that softened their contours of it, the images becoming bleary or just being these little narratives that each of the conversations led embroidered her conversations, one of the avatars imparting a lesson





about living life or another seeking a conclusion with a kind of lover's tryst scenario. kunakida flicked her hand down a wireframe model, carving the tails of a dress before slicing the air upward with one finger to slit the middle.

'niayaniaya, foxtel' kunakida said

'yes?'

'how's the look for this dress-coat?' she said showing me the model on the table, a long jacket slit at the side where the zipper was, curving under the sleeve into spiked lapels, the collar notched behind the neck. kunakida only leaned on her arm, almost a bit bored after all that. 'it's mobile and it looks kinda nice'

'it's a'ight' i said, rotating the model as the tails flutter and it looks more as if the jacket coils around them with the curved side zipper where i enable the shaders, the model's body changes into different hues like a soft light glowing within them as i see the back, the slightest jut of the spine from the gap at the back of the collar. 'showing a bit of neck tho'

'that's hot, niaya'





‘glad to see your eroticism still plays into your design’

‘you gotta be kind of a pervert for this ya know’ she said and i wondered if the nakedness of a body seemed to her near apocalyptic with its stark figure whose areolae swirled into dun blankness but only within these clothes, the instance of a sleeve sliding down to the wrist like a stem, knobbed before the hands, could these bodies be more than mere statues and poses but imbued with a kind of movement that allowed users to flow through these servers that as she glimpsed her model walking around the table, turning to the side as if some unseen person had called to them, she could imagine through a moment , that these users did not merely pass each other in the thousands of connections that surrounded them.

‘what does viper say about it’

‘he won’t try anything i make, he just stands there like,’ she says before putting on a dour expression. “oh that’s nice i guess’ and then shies away’

‘well, he’s not one for looking extravagant or anything’

‘i’m a regular versay-tze’ she laughed, mispronouncing the cantonese .



'you could do something with this. there's a lot of pmc units who probably want formal design'

'i don't want to run it through pmc's or anything. i just like having it. it's nice just having it here'

'you might be right about that.' i said., this life that seemed so simple, as easy as even the pedestrian fantasies that took place here, unfolding in such a predictable measure, the whispers or hesitations their own mechanics, the life this supposedly emitted seeming all too rare. in my own internal-os, i enter schemata, vision soars upward before looking at the café server from above, seeing the contours of the space dotted where the tables were, the fountain its own rippled circle and all the users present became their own starlight, rays shot off them forming entire constellations of different latencies that could then compile into market data, this amalgamation of images from the user interested in baseball servers or another's frequenting of the seductive lover scenario often that would alter them into a kind of serene plaza or street that elapsed between us, and maybe users would call that life.

knowing parts of narrative design, this server was no exception, reonuxala insisted on a relaxed environment akin to the maid cafes in japan built like imitation castles and





chateau hotels. these were enough to construct a composite environment, highlighting concentration points within the space such as people seating near the fountain or wanting to be near the balconies, something of an ancient high life with hidden debaucheries that pulled at the stiff manners, scantily clad maidens under arches and nude statue fountains, stones carved into chiseled bodies with decorative vines laced around the doors for 18+ sections. we would enter the server's data and models before our eyes swooped into an empty silhouette wandering the pin-striped columns while testing thousands of scenarios from reonuxala's different personalities to the different situations that can be encountered., these parameters hovered in the air , within the reonuxala avatar's steps, the flick of her tongue on her teeth, her breath, her manners before fulfilling them in this soft sequence that didn't rush from one set to the next, unless it was requested of course. through test interactions, we sat at tables with the avatars or strolled through the space, light shone crosses on the amethyst tiled floor before flying out of the silhouette avatar before launching up to see it from above, the 18+ rooms looked like blocky paws of this creature that must have been the limbs that seemingly extended themselves out of the shy user, sensing their touch that was so unlike the pleasant yet distant affairs now muted into their





palms reaching for that figure, calling for the real reonuxala within the wired who seemed to be there in front of them, stroking the avatar's back yet she merely glanced the proceedings somewhere within the faint light, rippling just a moment. i remember hearing that avatar calibration to replicate heightened senses required intense concentration to align mental activity into the shaping of these avatars.

schemata was prominent in the american frontier midwest states to improve police response by mapping the rooms in their ui emitted by their limited bandwidth on each unit or if they have a TOC, they could guide through the operation, making predictions based on the room sizes and even seeing unguarded suspects who didn't enable any kind of psychic silhouette to obscure them from schemata which didn't render complex figures. it was particularly made famous when they hunted a gang leader named goldman who was a part of the old silk road trades trafficking weapons, drugs and even people in the real world and the wired, someone from the southern states claimed the other city state servers such as new atlanta harbored him but it was mostly conjectural disputes. i suppose reonuxala's lick of her lips or smile, goldman's movement of goods all





sewed these connections in the wired somewhere, creating the narratives elapsing before us.

‘hey,’ kunakida said.

‘what’s up?’

‘have you ever thought of god here in the wired?’

‘what brought this up?’

‘oh no, i just thought...that before people thought of god or miracles like this sudden alignment in everything, like the world had a spasm that righted itself but now on the wired, it’s like, everything’s connected already, in the same way some people thought of god that all life was together and things happens for a reason, of some kind anyway. so do you think god’s watching from the outside or do they still sow some miracles even in electric signals.’

perhaps god was like the user on the computer in the previous century who glimpsed these happenings that both watched and was part of these several connections that could still exist in this plane that seemed entirely separate but it seemed more like an old idea of an overseeing god that would be evoked in old-age surveillance that





saw good citizens in its lens only passing by. maybe god was a stranger on the wired and that the heavens crashed through the sky until their light eroded all of the earth that appeared in brief unreal flashes. just then, i leaned back and someone bumped into me and with a flick of my head towards them, black lines sketched at the contours of a middle eastern girl with wavy mid-length hair and flannelled scarf, a cape housed body armour with a crest, the lines that scribbled around her arm spiked at this disturbance, the shape of her psycho-silhouette.

‘yo, watch it’ she said

‘you first, why’d you walk so close to these chairs anyway?’ i asked, a little annoyed i didn’t get one of those signal conductor apparatuses that extracted information from touch but even then, she didn’t move and through her graffiti shadow, her hands raised themselves curling into a light fist underneath a concealed holster under her arm, more a formality that outlined the situation as follows: the situation will escalate if any tension is applied. given this space’s clearanceware, no users were supposed to be able to bring any weapons so she must’ve been some kind of security personnel. although i was surprised it wasn’t some-





one inconspicuous in a suit although maybe the gallant cape fit the aesthetic.

‘hmpf, just checking you out. you don’t look like you’re here for the café services. you’re not with any of the avatars’

‘not particularly, i’m just here on the part of a friend. i was on the production team’

‘really now,’ she said, her eyes jittered in place as i imagine her internal os scrolled through several dossiers

‘woaah that crest!’ kunakida exclaimed and i noticed on the girl’s body armour wrapped in a half shawl cape, an emblem of thin leaves beaded with fruit upon a sun. ‘what kind is it?’

‘it’s my own.’ she replied not taking her eyes off the unseen data.

‘woow...it’s neat. about time someone did these utilitarian looks with some style’

‘mhm’ the middle eastern girl cleared her throat, ‘well i just need to keep an eye on things here as all. there’s the occasional user who acts up around here. besides there’s







no better way to check than to disturb them a little. isn't that how life can be sometimes' she said. did it seem that the real was always this reluctant plane that we had to return to in the same way that children groaned about going home or maybe it was this chaotic realm that always found ways to jar us from our own machinations, appearing in the form of climate disasters from the previous centuries until the wired gave us this endless everyday of streets and fields that made the real all the more this primordial realm that dusted our fingers, dampened our heated limbs.

'funny way of putting it. so we 're cool now?' i ask her.

'for now...' she narrowed her eyes before turning away but then one of the reonuxalas appeared to us dressed in a formal suit but beamed upon seeing us.

'marsa!' she said. 'things are looking good!'

'i see,'

'didn't expect to see you here little fox' she snickered and i only roll my head to the side as she remembered that when she tried one of the sultry scenarios, i mostly said nothing, looking away as the avatar made attempts to get close to me assuring me we could be the same if we wanted to





here, stroking my knee as i scooted away before returning onto schemata, assuring reonuxala herself that it works although in my confirmations, she only stared a moment before agreeing, that momentary silence between that must have confirmed something else entirely.

‘right...well. kunakida wanted to show as all’

‘awww, well kun-kun think you can design something sometime, i’d like to try more midriff wear sometime.’

‘niaya, that could be something. i’d like to do all kinds of things for design with you and the other gendered avatars you have’

‘ahhh you fujoshis. i’m still working on voice training for those without relying so much on pitch tuners’

‘you do voice rendering too?’

‘yeah, gotta make it all real somehow. so you can hear my voice’

‘all in the needed time’ i replied.

‘shall we get going?’ marsa offered.





‘yes, well...i’ll see you later!’ she waved, blowing a kiss to kunakida.

they both leave and wonder what all that was about. while i heard of some users breaking server guidelines, i didn’t think she’d call actual security operators. however my thoughts are interrupted upon kunakida putting her head beside my shoulder looking at them.

‘i think they might be together’

‘are you waiting for them to hold hands? what if that’s just an avatar’

‘oohh that’s so interesting. like maybe marsa’s in love with reonuxala but everytime they touch she only feels the palms of the avatar, not sensing the real her...’ she went on about her fanfiction but i continue to look at marsa who walked between the different tables, perhaps concealed even when looking at each of them through schemata or the default viewer that let one watch any of the tables before sending a request to join a table or create a new one with their own parameters, their conversations darted around in laughter and confirmations or mock denials, these different poses glimpsed in each moment. several users wandered and i wondered if marsa was actively





searching through one of them and perhaps there is something going on and i get up from my seat as well.

‘i’m gonna check something out.’

‘niayayniaya, just don’t break anything’

users flit around me, some stand near the tables watching in near meditative silence as those with reonuxala’s avatars moved within their eyes and i walk past, others dawdle in the slightest fidgets, thinking which table to enter or if they should just go alone, thinking of it like its own ritual of appearing before another person, whereas in groups, there was the slightest bit of invisibility they could afford amidst the chatter. however, one user walks past, their contours serrate, face and chest waver in the light before settling back again as if a reflection disturbed from a raindrop but soon they emerged again walking to another table using some concealer to avoid being detected right away from the entry/exit systems, yet they were completely unaware even as i walked towards them, a single step and in an exhale, flowing across the signals that darkened around me, a spasm from the user threw off their concealer, their amok hands let me seize them by the wrist pinning it to their back while activating a lock-out procedure which prevents anything or anyone within the user’s psycho-sil-



houette or grasp to log out but it doesn't activate and in that lapse i realize the café had turned into until purple surrounded us almost as if within a bruise and below us, the tiled floor spilled across the ground like blood while a few of the columns remained. marsa approaches, or more precisely, she arrived on inline skates whose wheels rolled over the floor in a sound like babbles of water where she stood and paused at a distance, placing us at effective firing range should she draw her weapon.

'well, i'd rather have done this elegantly, i suppose you must be punished for your disturbance'

'what do you mean? i work here too you know?'

'it would have been best not to disturb our clients here'

'well, this is rather surreal, isn't it? i guess maybe for those of us who fire guns on the wired, this old world seems nothing more than what it is'

'do not associate me nor reonuxala's work so casually with such.' she spat before she gestured to hand over the user. doing so with a push, he stumbles and shadows rushed from the ground, revealing themselves in the light as flesh sucked themselves onto the user's feet and bound their





arms behind them, signals blunted around them, unable to move or use their internal os. marsa then asked. 'what were you doing jumping in and out of the servers'

'what? it's not uncharacteristic behaviour'

'this is a place of sociality. you could've made your own room but the fact you were doing what you were doing seems too deliberate of an act'

'you know nothing...' they seethed. 'do you know the truth huh huh huh that put you and that woman together in the first place that's so conspiratorial?'

'the only conspiracy i'm seeing is whatever shady nonsense you're spouting.'

'yeah, yeah, you always say that kind of trite phrase of yours whenever coming up on something that seems like the truth all these naysayers deny deny deny and you think things are normal as they should well i tell you what'

we waited in silence as his rant cut abruptly, his lips tremble waiting to start again before other security teams appeared with marsa. the nature of his words were very common among the conspiratorial circles that wore the





word truth so threadbare that its proclamations became little more than whispers within the wired, the century old paintings marked up in red marker little shapes that seemed to be common among all of them, making signs towards secret societies that directly controlled everything but even with what I'd seen, such things sounded like it was straight out of a horror game server narrative as these so called monsters dispelled across the smooth floors and did not so much control things rather than just watch them, perhaps in the same way we did looking at people or users in the same space and associating them together like kunakida's fanfiction. although even as producer involved me with tai shu kwong, crineberg, or even the moon protégé triads, it seemed everything seemed so casual as none of them involved any kind of secret dungeons and it merely seemed like business, an incidental connection that moved data or products that was its own kind of latticed vestibule that oversaw these conspiracies. if anything, the briefest interruptions of these flows, invited talks of conspiracy so maybe they secretly wanted a world that moved so perfectly.

marsa locked access privileges while i received an after action report, as if to retain the formality that i was still a consultant and that security matters are also part of my





concern. i soon returned to the café with the sound of chatter swelled up broken by the footsteps of wandering users, the water splashing in the fountain and it made that earlier ordeal seem like a small mental disturbance that brought a pause to one's thoughts, even stopping their pacing to follow that pool of forgetting down until that memory flickers again clear like an ember. soon i return to my room, a weak pulse of fluorescence upon the sensations of my hands going through some notes and eating before returning to the wired on a server, modelled after a north american old plaza, the walls stretches of pale pink paint, chipped slightly with blue cornices, walls with little gardens at the top surrounded a court of tables frosted in fluorescence while neon blushes on alabaster faces of the occasional statue of nude sitting figures, the tragic figure whose chiseled expressions were the only thing that differentiated them from the smooth stone faces, white light beamed from a monitor until its rays dimly illuminated the walls of a dark room. users post their messages in conversations on a bbs open on my os retaining the old scroll of topic threads from paranormal sightings to conspiracies, thinking these old ways were best to retain some level of anonymity, threads whisper like ghosts within the empty plaza, these ebbs within the neon whose waves washed up





2'  
LVCIT121  
AET  
FVCS2  
VCCNM2VM  
WPECENV2  
AENNV  
CMMODO  
A:202  
EVAIDV  
P1VICES2  
23E  
202LEND1  
1120W  
0N12  
VTIDNV  
WVENV  
D0TORE  
E1  
FVBORE  
W101  
IWCIDIDN  
LELOR  
E102WOB  
2E1 DO  
WE EG11  
VDT12C1  
10W  
COWSEC1E  
WHEL  
211  
D0TOR  
1120W  
F0RCH

across glass panes as my os projected the current topic onto it.

‘there’s this audio file floating around. don’t know where its recorded and it doesn’t even have a signal origin’

‘goobers getting fooled again’

posts that said ‘die’ flickered between these amidst other replies.

‘this number sequence might have occult significance but idk man’

‘isn’t this reader of this sound kinda hot?’

‘isn’t this poster in need of some bitches. fuck these anons here are always coming here with this shit. go wipe your fucking mouth of spittle and cum and go the fuck outside’

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‘isn’t this poster in need of some bitches. fuck these anons here are always coming here with this shit. go wipe your fucking mouth of spittle and cum and go the fuck outside’

‘diediediediedie’

‘diediediediedie’

amidst this, someone claimed the following:

‘the personality reonuxala posted an image of her new sports jersey outfit with the number 41 on the 22nd day. found number of clients were 35043 and 46922. Will investigate.’

‘re: reonuxala. posting fap material? send 18+?’

at the op’s post, i play the audio file and within a distorted guttural croak of some ancient radio, the static composes itself into a voice that read a number sequence in a metronomic rhythm.

22 33 4 23 17





2'  
LVCIG121  
AET  
ГVCS2  
VCCNM2VM  
HPECENV2  
HCEENBV  
CMMODO  
H.202  
EVVAIDV'  
HIVICES2  
22E  
202FEND1  
H20M  
0N12  
VHIDVV'  
WVWV  
DQTORE  
E1  
ГVBORE  
H1 01  
HVCIDIDN  
LENLOR  
E102MOD  
2E1 DO  
WE EG11'  
VDTI12CI  
10W  
COM2EC1E  
WHEL'  
211  
DQTOH  
H20M  
ГOVEM

41 28 48 12 41

43 11 25 4 25

46 29 14 12 21

32 39 12 50 22

42 49 47 10 38

36 23 21 45 22

3 17 43 21 20

33 34 9 38 34

48 38 7 11 31

i then post.

'man where all the users at that would just threaten to straight up kill you on these posts. don't see that anymore'

'what do you think this is the ghetto' another user going by exxon\_serpico replied, others posting image macros or rappers from the previous centuries.

'killing is stupid'





‘says the people outta the wild west. you know those john wayne types probably fucked cows and had a dirty ass right?’ i said.

‘are you from the ghetto’

‘get on a chair and uh hang yourself” i post

‘off topic’ another intervened

‘we got a ghetto-mog in here. get the forks boys’ exxx-on\_serpico posted

‘gonna swat me? tough luck on that shit, come shoot me yourself” and then i follow with: ‘wait, fork? you wanna eat me? man, you revealing yourself ass out right now. too much’

‘you into vore?’ one of the posters replied to the ‘get the forks post’

‘post your address right now’

‘what and deprive you of the work? what happened to hard work?’





and it went on, the posts from this "conversation" made a riot that thrumming through my mind in a similar way to using the rhythm from ghosts of the fingers that once touched upon keyboards before hurtling epithets to them until even the frames of each post throbbed with the flood of incoming messages. entering my own os, i unpack the contents of the audio file with only the waveforms scribbled along the playback time measure line of 1:03 minute. tethering any line or association together, the nodes only flashed an antenna protruding out from a wall whose surfaces spiked out suggesting insufficient data. the only lead was marsa who will probably remain tight-lipped on any details from earlier but also concerned about reonuxala's own confidentiality. looking at the after action report, the table servers the user appeared in were as follows:

- 412848
- 124143
- 112542
- 4629141

i stared at the number tags for a moment almost in disbelief such a lineup of numbers even existed for that user to





pursue. but such a string must have been enough to draw them in. just how immaculate these numbers were to conjure such a sequence and so they followed, as if to unfold a certain narrative. a kind of storybook that people told themselves that even things like the massive amounts of currencies would even prop up.

secrets, large and small always drew people in and did re-  
onuxala appear to be in the center of it, those shrouding her hoping to get at her, this real her through the thousands of avatars seated in her cafes every day.

transferring out to the café server, i use the limited privileges to request an inquiry with marsa. upon processing it, i'm put into the café server where marsa waited for me, eyes flickering towards the other users before i sit beside her, the space melted around us in purple until only this fountain remained on a shred of tiles, the closed space she formed.

'don't worry about our avatars in the café. they'll just be on idle. think of this like thinking other thoughts while going about daily life.'

'alright'



‘what is the nature of your inquiry?’

‘it’s about reonuxala. do you know anyone that’s targeting her?’

‘if it’s about that forum post, that’s irrelevant. It’s merely bad actors.’

‘i think the stage has more than bad actors.’

‘not our concern’

‘are you sure it’s nothing that could be related to anything about those number patterns whose sequence might i add have correlations? it’s imperative that one has full awareness of a situation even if it’s with mere security which is something an operator such as yourself should already know and enact especially if it’s to protect the integrity, safety and confidentiality of reonuxala.’

‘and what evidence do you have to suggest that they’re involved?’

‘on the time that user was following the tables they were following a set of tables with number codes exactly the same as the sequence posted on the bbs. don’t you think





that might be more of a security vulnerability if you just dismiss it'

she said nothing but it set a precipice, an impenetrable ground that will only let passage across it but she would let nothing injure reonuxala or any business related to her. security vulnerabilities were only a matter she would handle, leaving the affairs of the café blurred around her, the sketches across her limbs grow more aggressive almost as if scribbling to weave a thousand lines spinning potential threats but seeing her unmoved expression gave no indication of concern.

'well, i just need information.'

'i have a report that i'll give access too but that's it. anything else will be ill-advised.'

'ro-ger.' i said before returning to the café space, the chatter bloomed with one of the reonuxala's at my periphery moving as if a ghost just outside of these gatherings of tables. 'she here today?'

marsa didn't answer but i merely smile, establishing this silence as the imports and exports of our professional affairs before i settle down, logging out back into my room





where my weight sinks at the table, opening the interface, checking various hallway feeds and motion detectors at each part of the hall. while being hunted in the real was rare, it was still a possibility to consider even if it seemed remote as what happened on the wired, this one more of a lurid fantasy that could intercut the strobe of the fluorescent light. returning to the plaza forum, i string together the numbers again, thinking of reonuxala but in the little island of ruins, only glimpses of her appeared within the cloud, unable to localize, neither circular to indicate a zone or a triangulation or even the boxed dimensions. however, someone did leave a message on the forum.

'i'm waiting at palo shabba server.' it said in reply to my previous message. given everyone were anons, finding them would take some work. palo shabba was a server of an old inner city with stairways to the entrances of apartments where people always loitered out front, basements rocked with parties that shook the first floor fading into the mumbles and throbs throughout the street that brought together the activities across them. other anons replied to the post, although seeming more like the remaining murmurs until the forum would cease action for a brief moment.





‘now kiss’

‘are we gonna film this?’

‘what does this have to do with the code?’

loading into the server, the place seems barren yet the music pulsed somewhere within american apartment blocks with windows decked in brick designs and slight arches, peering into them were empty offices bathed in white light almost like the salvations of a normal life whose machinations and thrums grazed upon calendars of beaches reserved some other vacation, models of cities that might rid of the city outside the office like it was the last chance of a future that could stare contemptuously or even just nostalgically at these apartments around it, crumbling slightly with vituperations occurring outside with only the creak from a swing at an empty playground shone under a parklamp of all these abandoned games that once played here as i turn my head, looking at the lone user that stood on the pavement with a greased up shirt bulged slightly by some kind of body armour, legs apart with some kind of revolver strapped to a rectangular pad also containing an unknown 9mm pistol wrapped in a velcro x . exxon\_serpico looked at me from the light, blushed a little be-





fore clearing their throat and that kind of look must have looked at some supple part of me even within this jacket.

‘s-so...i see you’ve arrived’ exxon\_serpico said

‘did you really have to pick a server like this? you really must be on some other shit to do this in an impoverished area’

‘well, it’s befitting of a killer such as yourself. to die in a place such as this’

‘that’s rather disgusting. pervertedly so, actually...’

‘you see, why fight it? we are the same actually. why did you come here in the first place?’

‘let me ask, what’ll happen if i shoot you right now’

‘enough of this,’ he said before picking up a can off the ground. ‘we start once the can hits the ground’ he said and lobs it up, the can leaves his hand slow, the inky night air thick with signals that sculpted the stride of our legs as the server disabled use of anything like step-transfer but with just a throw of my hand, the vp70 emerged out like a polymer shuttle launched across the air as he was between the ramps of the front sight, in a stumble yet it





concealed his stance as his wrist flicked a revolver, its long barrel peeled at the rim into a front sight which he did not use, the pull of the revolver's trigger enabled the hammer to strike the .357 magnum round in the cylinder knowing that anything before him would be instantly obliterated in the damnation of that shot its recoil stunted them still but they had no need to move as he saw the body before him falter into the darkness as if a bad dream, yet the silence cleaved did not offer peace as he turned toward his side as i emerge, electric signals coiled around my arms, reaching him yet entering in his radius, he swung his arm against his stomach where his revolver was right before me and as he pulled the trigger, the muzzle flash glazed across his beady eyes picqued upon his revolver suddenly pushed up as i use the recoil's force to move it upwards, merely continuing the trajectory of the barrel as i plant the vp70m to their chest, the throbs of 9mm rounds tore through their shirt but their impact dulled against a steel plate carrier, before i could move any further, exxon\_serpico clenched their teeth and sensing a rift in their intention, i throw myself behind a parked car as a pulse rung out from him, little flakes fell into the air as the signals fell dead against his steps, unaffected by any modifiers from the wired as it was only us and our weapons until the cessation in the floes of signals sewed themselves again. on the defensive,



he drew his 9mm pistol in his other hand and fired in my direction, letting its light envelop him as he moved almost like a ghost within its gold as he moved by the stairway flanked by a wall, using the extra step to mount his revolver before letting its shot punch into the splitting the fence around a tree until they seemed like stalks of iron growing out of the grate. out of the soil, the branches writhed from the veins within it, or rather the flow of the signals and wire frames bent into the leafless boughs as we exchanged gunfire that left us tangled, as recoil seized us out of the electric air as our nerves coursed flashes of sensation, the pavement under our steps trying to unwind ourselves, rotations of each passing round trying to draw us into the mortality that lay within our silhouettes that lagged behind us.

haze smothers the street until the bulbs of parklamps seemed like seeds in pools of orange as i try to echolocate, the halo on the ground ripples over the parked car and apartment but senses some disturbances in the middle of the street and i move across the tarmac . exxon\_serpico at least had the decency to conceal themselves but i leap forth, a step transfer takes me to a crouch behind the wall of a stairway, checking around me for any presence but the an approaching motor swallows up the calm as a large





muscle car threw itself onto the street from around the corner, crystal headlights tipped like a blade off a long broad sabre , a large grille glimmered in the light that threw white river across the windshield until the occupants stepped out to pop smoke as a canister spun on the ground consuming us in cloud-drift, as our figures sketched into the grey. one individual in a jacket plastered with logos moved away, diving towards the ground upon hearing, before scrambling forward from the tremor off exxon\_serpico's revolver, magnum rounds punched the open door of the muscle car closed. the other occupant crouched looking towards my direction trying to discern something from the roof of the parked cars as the smoke thins out, the iron halo of the g3a3 already surrounds its target, its single spire risen before their crouched form and from here, just waiting for the final action.

a 7.62x51mm round speared through them, their hands opened involuntarily throwing a tmp machine pistol on the ground. while it did not hit a vital area, it was enough to incapacitate them. death meant little on the wired, only being these sudden blackouts that severed the pulses of blue but it almost seemed there was something pure about an unbroken life that somehow became this constant lingering. so, kill-farmers would show almost like these little



reapers that'd inflict death upon other users, forcefully cutting them from their loops until they awoke back in their rooms, uncradled by signals where they faced the thin darkness of a room, even if they reached up towards the ceiling, the ache within their arm perhaps knowing their fingers would only skim across the surface, relieved only by the smallest of decays upon it. sliding to the rear quarter of the muscle car, the user in the tagged jacket focused the fire of their fmg-9 submachine gun, its length fanged at the sides, aiming through the sights between the handle while exxon serpico continued to fall back towards the end of the street where a 1990s sedan with a hood dipped in a gentle curve towards long headlights approached to cut them off. exxon serpico fell back but their open hands suddenly held spawned a long rifle in them, an edge pivoted out from the receiver where i perceived high calibre rounds within the short magazine. also seeing this, all the occupants got out, each pull of the trigger tore at metal as if an invisible mouth had sunken its teeth into the car door as all of the concrete rended into stillness from each round shot, and our steps seemed so limp within this calamity as i aimed for the car, crevices splattered out the broken windows but the car rocked to the side perhaps from exxon serpico ducking to the side but soon the car drives off but oddly enough, the former





occupants didn't shoot back and as i watch, i try to find a way sneak out but the log-out failed, a psycho-silhouette pressed down on me until i couldn't concentrate watching figures surround my position as if falling into darkness.

upon opening my eyes, a man sat on a couch, lounging in it, looking down, ornate lamps cast golden pools around us, sculpted in shadows. rather, their light sewed together these masses of static like the glow within the wired could invert into dark brackish algae. the man wore bandages wrapped around their neck all the way down to their arm while a ripped black jacket adorned his other arm but his sneer was apparent , the same kind that always avoided capture and every time someone attempted, he was always far away, watching it happen.

'goldman...'

'you read the papers?'

'someone with a name like goldman is pretty well known. gold hasn't lost its lustre'

'and i can say i heard a lot about you too with your works with the megacorps and server consultations. If only you brought yourself a resume.'





‘should’ve known that those guys appearing weren’t just kill-farmers’

‘hm, well, everyone wants to play the big hero don’t they? conquering others...killing them...murder without consequence...but you don’t seem like that...you’re not appalled by it nor are you particularly moved by it...’

‘you’re rather sentimental, aren’t you, goldman.’

‘right, well there are only a few things that matter both on the real and the wired. goods and movement. only now, goods can be anything, makes the organ trade look tame and archaic...so where shall we move you’

‘if you’re arranging something, i can give you a practical measure and hunt down this user, exxxon serpico for you. your boys didn’t fire when he took that car, so obviously something’s in it.’

‘you quite observant’

‘well gotta know things when i see em’

‘that server you boys were in, palo shabba is my server. i use it as a little off the books party space. a little similar to new atlanta but without high corps on it. but it does get





a bit grating when people want to play go postal on there for some reason'

'well, there goes the excess of crime'

'excess is almost archaic now. data is data and even the supposed numbers it contains no longer have any fixed value, so we have to at least keep something worthwhile'

'that car is one of those, and exxon serpico's now a target. i get one, i get both. let me track them and the car is yours.'

'no actually, i will. my two operatives have a deal with someone in the southern villas who might be related to your target. you have your target and my business. plus, i am aware of your work as a tai shu affiliate'

'you're very astute. your business connections could rival the likes of victor from new atlanta'

'we just make connections. deroca and lestrani will meet you'

'so how do you plan to find him?'

'how do you think we found and know about you'





blinking, the lock-out releases and i log out, landing back in the dark recesses in my room, single fluorescent light shrouds around me as i open the interface at the security cameras, detecting no movements apart from the shadows that scurry out of view, these images of empty corridors flipped through my mind, seeking that one figure to approach, seeming itself no more than a picture and the disconnected signals from my own tensed nerves, prickling on my skin from the static, conducted.

tiles of posts ask about the shootout in palo shabba with some party goers saying they heard some loud bangs while other posted shaky video footage in this mosaic of views patched together in a kind of kaleidoscope mirror, each vector of the post bends the street within the video, the figures in them until they fold or recur around me. looking into the numbers came long posts about how users found the numbers in innocuous ways like rolling 12 rare items and then encountering 50 second loads through dungeons in a mmorpg. no sign of exxon serpico's post or even someone posting the way he does. closing the os, fluorescence glazes the countertops and shelves with figurines and worktable where the vp70m machine pistol and g3a3 battle rifle sat but even then, no amount of light changed the heft of this room that i would always find myself crash-





ing down into, the dioramas of character unmoved in their little islands, my return to this room to eat meals between entering the wired, or sleeping, almost like this tether and did one think that only in the wired, did things happen, did things change, somehow freed from the mundanities that churned within our innards, our hungers that somehow someone would still try to point to, the ghost of organs that'd cause us to have to return to its primordial systems. i had heard things such as organ traffickers attempting to augment the feeling of being on the wired by having direct body parts as reference points for virtual spaces but it sounded more like just a mere story, the tragic body that clutched at itself from the flashes of synapses where their nerves showed these irradiated fields that in their hands, the static had suddenly planed into blades of grass, and the truth of the convulsions within their innards became distant, no longer this solemn little death only noticed by the slightest ebb within the endless light.





2'  
LVCIGI21  
AET  
FVCS2  
VCCSM20W  
WRECEM02  
AALERNV  
CMM0D0  
A.202  
EVAIDV'  
PILVICE2  
23E  
202LEMD1  
1120W  
0N12  
VGI00V'  
WVEMV  
D0G0RE  
E1  
FVBORE  
W1 01  
IWCIDID0  
LEML0W  
E102W0B  
2E1 D0  
WE EG11'  
VDTI12C1  
10W  
C0W2EC1E  
WWE1'  
211  
D0G0R  
1120W  
F0WEM



IT'S A GOOD THING  
the DARK LORD  
IS A SHUT-IN!

by: [baroquespiral](#)

Name: IOLAW MARK'EG

Blood type: C

Likes: Sweet coffees and/  
or hot chocolates, memory  
games, peer-reviewed journals,  
medical mystery (popular and  
avant-garde), gift-giving, the  
mission of humanity

Dislikes: Icy walks, quirky  
glasses, hallucinogenics,  
the smell of hospitals, badly  
designed magic, Traditional  
Orthodoxy

Theme song: Goatbed - Neu-  
romancer



Seen with: Colonel Inquisitor  
Dahellan

An ambitious medical student from an ennobled brewing family - Mark'eg Mead&More is still a staple of C'harnian grocery shelves - marginalized by the nationalization of industry in Elthazan, Iolaw jumped from a surgical stream to psychology due to (according to his own interviews) its conceptual flexibility and dialogic spontaneity, despite lack-




ing no proficiency in the domains of science based on physical/spatial intelligence and memorization, and a discomfort with the body that had been brewing as he came to understand more and more of it. There, while writing his thesis on the Psychodynamic Structure of Tragedy, his natural talents of observation and manipulation were detected by the Orthodox International Military Inquisition. The Inquisition in general is the Ecclesia's version of an Intelligence Agency - and it has been using for several centuries longer than any of the Seven Nations' Intelligence Agencies, which date primarily back to the Second Dark War. The Orthodox International Military Inquisition is the equivalent of an international intelligence agency - theoretically equally beholden to the governments of each nation and the Ecclesia, occupying the positions of stakeholders in a complex Maullanian governing algorithm that allotted services and governing directives through a system of esoteric tokens. In practice this unstable

*preserver record*

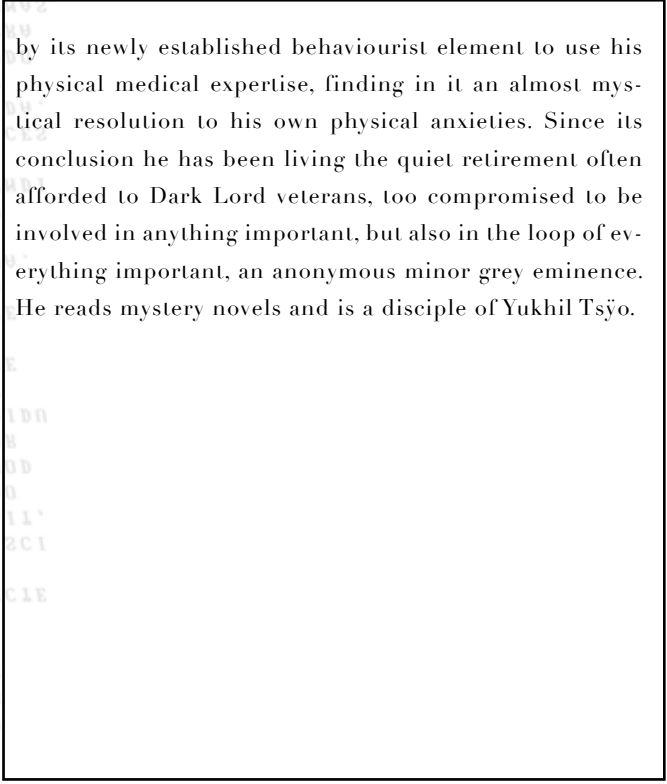


power sharing arrangement makes it dangerously independent.



He led several innovative campaigns psychologically profiling and identifying shape-shifters before getting Top Clearance and being assigned to the Dark Lord operation - a massive jump from his on-paper rank of Major Doctor Inquisitor. At the front, he has the same reputation as Rraihha Braz as a hypersincere idealist - one who joined the Inquisition because its ideology gave him direction when he was initiated. At heart, he remains a curious, bored man, although one who feels bothered by an itch for direction. Before joining he had no strong theological views, but on discovering Inquisitional Orthodoxy discovered they were the final piece of his puzzle; his family reputation alone had not mattered enough to him to direct his energies. He struggles with being genuinely cruel to patients, and always tries to give them the softest landing possible into whatever position he puts them in. On occasions, though, he is also occasionally called on





by its newly established behaviourist element to use his physical medical expertise, finding in it an almost mystical resolution to his own physical anxieties. Since its conclusion he has been living the quiet retirement often afforded to Dark Lord veterans, too compromised to be involved in anything important, but also in the loop of everything important, an anonymous minor grey eminence. He reads mystery novels and is a disciple of Yuxhil Tsÿo.

it's a good thing  
the DARK LORD  
is a shut-in!


## *Synopsis*

luskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy, social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life, a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.



## *Last Time*

Luskonneg receives an offer of help to prepare for the strange journalist's interview, but can he pull himself together to prepare for the help?



CW: social anxiety, humiliation, dissociation, discussion of hell, discussion of institutionalization, psychoanalysis, psychiatric abuse, OCD triggers (executive function, sexual/romantic feelings, thought-action fusion), torture, incontinence, gendered religious metaphysics, religious police, parental death, underage exposure to erotic media, masturbation, sexualization of peers, self-harm, imageboards, vomit, school punishment

*Click.*

“How often do... things like the incident I saw happen?”

“First... second time in four years.”

“I’m sorry if I. Caught you at a bad time and made assumptions.”

**FAILURE 07: YOUR BRAIN'S CONTROLLED OPPOSITION**

DEF  
TVCN2  
VCCN22M  
MVECEM2  
NIGENBU  
COMMOD  
N1202  
CBVOTDU  
N1NICE2  
2SE  
202LEND1

THE  
DARK  
SIDE  
OF  
THE  
MIND



2  
LUCIF  
AET  
GUCS2  
VCCNM20M  
WPECENV2  
AUCENNV  
CUMODO  
A 202  
EVAIDV  
PTVIBICE2  
23E  
202FEND1  
1120M  
0N12  
VTIDNV  
WVENV  
DORORE  
E1  
GVBORE  
W1 01  
IWCIDIDN  
LELOR  
E102WOD  
2E1 DO  
WE EG11  
VDT12CI  
10M  
COW2EC1E  
WHEL  
211  
DOROR  
1120M  
GORCH



“No, your assumptions were completely right. Your timing was just batshit insane.”

“...huh. So like how often do you go outside.”

“Third time in... two years. Last time was just around the corner to pick stuff up from my mom.”

“Whoa. So you’re the real deal huh. Did this used to happen before you... withdrew?”

He opened his mouth and moved it silently. A gob of something like gum floating in his back teeth. “...define ...this.”

“How often would you do something that would get you kicked out of a coffeeshop.”

“That doesn’t... tell you anything. First time I didn’t get kicked out. Didn’t last time either but I ran out which is basically the same.”

“...is it? People run out to like, catch a bus all the time. Again I’m sorry if I” -

“The time before that was the video.”





“Right. So that was the first - but like you can’t have like, never gone outside. Never talked to people.”

The man was... chewing his cud, like a cow or a goat. His eyes had misted over. “Oh. Oh oh oh. Thanks, you gave me a place to start. Have you ever seen... an an-an-shit!-an...”

“Animation? I know more people who are into stuff like that than you might think.”

She didn’t even call it anime. Did she really expect him to believe that?... Suddenly his voice seemed much more natural. Slightly stuttering, but almost arrogant. “OK, have you seen one called Hell Harrowing?”

“I’ve heard of it, but never gotten around to it.” She did prefer novels at the end of the day.

“OK, so in Hell Harrowing, the main love interest, the girl who falls from the sky, Azamiel Kelvoth, is the Daemon of the Cornerstone - she’s been imprisoned since birth in the deepest room of hell. And when she lands on Earth, and meets Astig - literally the first person she’s met other than through the mirrors, but that’s another thing - the first thing she wants to do is get back down there.”





“And does she?...”

“Well, no, but... Shunny Najda already barely got that series approved by the Ecclesia. He had to give it a happy ending for normies. But it’s one of the greatest series of all time anyway.”

“...do you think she should have?”

“Uhhh... look, if you haven’t seen it, I don’t think you have the context to have this discussion.”

“OK fair enough. Is it what you’d want?”

His eyes rolled back and forth for another 30, 60, 100 seconds.

“...I dunno... if wanting even matters to me anymore. When I want something, these days, I just find the easiest thing I can do to make it stop. Usually that’s something I have here. Porn, posting, ordering food online. Do you really think you’re going to get something interesting out of this?”

“Well... it’s a kind of uninteresting that’s not supposed to happen, which is interesting in itself.” She was describing the mission of Punkin - was she, in a sense, just trolling





him? She'd never started a thread there before, that had always been her ethical line in the sand, despite knowing she was better trained and intentioned to provide the information she permitted herself to consume. But now she was realizing that she had wanted to, and that she also knew what she wanted to do better. "The thing you just said about wanting, it almost sounds like you're quoting some old Miwa scriptures I know, but they wouldn't consider any of those things a legitimate..."

"...way to stop wanting things? I know." (From lurking /r/ - Religion and /mo/ - Monasticism.) "But it's not like I think I can stop either. It's more like... there's too many little things I want and don't have to even think about what I'd want in the best case." He flashed back to thinking about the Seer In The Half Light the other week and almost went nonverbal like at the beginning of the call again. No, if he put it that way, a room all alone wasn't what he wanted in the best case... that was why he'd never cared that much about Azamiel... but might it be better than anything he could have, might it be better than everything else except one out of infinite possibilities? This was all going too fast, he couldn't explain it to her, he might be able to point her to the right posts...





“Anyway, I meant more like, you must have gone to school. You can’t have been... like that all the time, even if you were, that’s what school is for. There’s people who resist, I’ve read about some hard cases...” maybe if this didn’t work, she could write about some of those. “But you don’t seem like the type of person who wants to do that.”

She had the strange feeling that she was penetrating the depths of some recurring dream, picking away at some thing she already knew that had been compacted into night, as she watched his eyes dart, almost roll. (He blinked - he was aware of it - he tried to look at her as if he was looking at the sun.) “I think it was what they wanted. But I could never figure out what they wanted. Not in 12 years. By the end I wanted so badly to get out. Grade 12 I could barely do my work because I wanted so badly to get out so I was scared to get out so I was scared to do my work. But I really wanted to get out so I did it anyway. Graduating Grade 12 was the only and last thing I ever did, maybe. I was like, catatonic maybe 80, 90 percent of the time I was at home. I can’t believe I’m saying this out loud like I’ve typed this in messages but never said it out loud. Forcing myself to write like, one line of a final project at a time. Just pushing myself through like a sticky darkness to the light where I could see my pencil. Like the Sea of Pumice.





Mom would try to pull me out of it like five times a day which wasted even more of it. I didn't even try entrance exams. I threw them all out, oh jeez, did I say that? I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm" -

The camera switched off.

Goddess. This was like trying to start a broken laptop running.

With non-specialized spells off the internet.

She might have just broken it.

It came back on five minutes later. The face was squinting and had lines from the pillow across it.

"I don't think this is answering your question," his voice drifted out calmly and thinly.

"Well, are you OK to keep going?"

"If we are going to, you are going to have to not ask that."

"Well maybe we should have something like..." She already had a bit of a sense the "safeword" analogy she had been thinking of was going to set him off. Psychologists



had to have a word for that, though, right? What did they call it?

“You have a psychologist, right?”

“I was a fan of yours from your clearance application exam.” Ottilie Tserghan, one of the “Heavenly Henge” of six maximum clearance Ecclesiastic psychologists, spun her signature gel pen back and forth, thwacking against her prematurely leathered, manicured fingernails. A dramatic sweep of platinum fell across her gold-complexioned face. She was actually three years younger than Rraitha Braz. “I don’t understand anything of this case. How did you give in to such mundane justifications, such banal distortions?”

“I didn’t give in to anything,” Braz elaborated. “I didn’t do anything but feel.”

“See, there’s what I mean. You know exactly what the privilege of contact with the [Taboo Preserver] demands of just feelings, and why. Or else you would have...”

“Acted on it? Spoken of it?”

“You did, in fact, speak of it. Which is why we are here.”





On an empty car of a train travelling at an hour the regularly scheduled trains had been abruptly cancelled along the Elthazan-Silmenon railroad. Even moor-hills like the piles of debris pulled from foundations slid past each other, the furthest and most inert the blue-white flyleaf of the C'harn Western Shield.

“Yes. I have no excuse for that.”

“Then what kind of error do you think it was?”

She counted the bars of wheel-clatter as she said nothing. Obvious answers kept forming in her mouth and then being shot down by the snipers in her brain. Time was repeating, not passing, for her, as closely and helplessly as she watched the repetitions add up to a passing.

The rest of the train was empty except, in every other car, a squad of three military Preservers, uninformed of the specifics of their mission, alternately deploying an interference spell so strong Braz could feel it buzzing like a power tool against the back of her skull for the duration of these sessions. They spent the rest of the time charging it while Braz was held in a meditative trance in her car, fixated on a complex symbolic fractal and unable to think of Ymañn. Thanks to this arrangement, the paper wards between the



train windows fluttered only slightly, within the designated safe five millimetres, as she racked her brain over her cursed feelings.

The words came out hollow; she let them pass as a show of cooperation after 15 repetitions. “I tried to balance a feeling with an action. Normally, that’s what confession is, but in this case...”

“Your own exam essay on retributive justice demonstrates that you don’t believe this is necessarily a complete break.” Tserghan balanced the pen on its tip and spun it from one finger (a childhood tic, a hypnotic trick, a distraction?...) “Actions permitted to balance feelings, even though the incompatibility between the two must be settled by the outcome of the action, not the feeling itself? ...I would have guessed you were operating on something like that yourself, but it seems you’re still hiding something.”

“But those feelings I wrote about are still something. They can be described in some terms, some intelligible relations within the Order, not just a word floating in the void. They stop people from doing things, they make them shake or freeze up or lash out or cry, they inscribe themselves as beliefs. If not for the fact that this spell even works...”





“None of those are the feeling itself. Feeling is its own layer of the manifold.”

“I know this - it’s also one of the ways I can detach feelings and let them go.”

“Mm-hmm. But you can’t for this one, right? And of course here we get into different kinds of feelings - the experience of the sky being blue can’t be detached from the sky, no matter how much you explain it in terms of anything else, not even if you know what the colour blue is and try to replace the affect with that information. Whereas if you associate the blue of the sky with happiness or sadness, that’s not irreducible in the same way, it’s an incomplete conceptual loop -“

“Which is closer to what love is, right, even false or forbidden love? Except apparently it’s *rhi* - how *does* it work? Doesn’t that defeat everything we’re saying about irreducible layers - if that were true couldn’t we solve all cheating, all matchmaking? Unless it’s simply that, by confessing - it wouldn’t even have to be a lie, ‘I love him’ could be true in all kinds of ways that wouldn’t be improper, but by saying it there, by implying that, I went back and poisoned it. Yes, it would make more magical sense if the substrate of the spell was the association, it would be more discrete,



more present in the interaction itself. And maybe, with your help, there would be some way to break it -”

Tserghan sucked air through her teeth. “Getting colder. I have no idea how the spell works, but I’ve heard that excuse from the most vulgar kinds of “forbidden lovers”... Of course there are people who genuinely do make themselves suffer by misidentifying an ordinary feeling as a [taboo] one, but nothing in your profile has ever suggested you would be one of them. Suppose that’s true - then why do you say it in the first place? Where does the suspicion start?”

“When I start to listen to the stories. The uhhh - infodumps.” She could almost explain them better, she realized, one by one - each such a novel, individual phenomenon that the common longing elicited by all of them could only be something as lofty and distant as nothing or love. And of course her eyes danced across his shoulders and his hair, such different kinds of soft at once - “OK. OK,” she breathed. Now she felt like she could say something she meant, without all this flooding back in “I still think I - crossed a boundary between layers. Maybe not... from nothing to something, but a boundary nonetheless. Which is the same thing I was afraid I would have been doing if I





simply resigned.” Now it felt as if the sun was coming out from behind a cloud. (Though outside, it dipped behind a dome downed with gorse.) “If I changed what we actually had for...” The ward in the window becoming more agitated.

“You made that possible, too. You made a whole request, not to get away but actually to get closer - I was on the committee that approved it. Were you aware of these feelings then? A lot of people want me to pin it all on the clinging man, another Serpent coiling too close and destroying what it desires. I think that would be less interesting, but of course if it’s true... after all it *was* a risk in his dossier...”

“That’s not what I mean. If I thought that was happening I wouldn’t have...” she trailed off, losing confidence in her own counterfactual - after all, *would* she have believed any of this about herself if it hadn’t happened? - and watched Tserghan take a note of it with the strangely satisfying internal bracing that had long since replaced the ordinary flinch at criticism or judgment by others. It had been so long, even in this situation... she had almost forgotten it amidst the numb, tingling nightmare-static, through which she could see clearly only at the cost of feeling nothing.





“Yes. Although we’ve basically given up. I play video games during sessions and bounce ideas for Feed posts off him sometimes.”

Right, she should have checked out his Feed earlier, he had mentioned early on he had one. She opened @MoePhrenology on the phone screen she glanced down at in her lap when he didn’t seem to be paying too much attention.

Wait a second. She had seen this account on Punkin... cited positively.

Everyone knew Scarecrows had more in common with their targets than the median civilian - that some were worse, even if you didn’t think the whole enterprise made them so by default - but mostly they maintained some cognitive dissonance about it, and she couldn’t imagine anyone acting like the man she had seen in that coffeeshop and not imagining the thread about themselves.

Of course she didn’t know from that if he posted on Punkin Patch himself. She could just ask any time she wanted but didn’t want to scare him off. But the very first thing





she saw on his profile was a string of reFeeds of OITO's bathroom stall waifu drawings. Word searches showed some familiarity with other famous Yonaf "Howling Tamarind" Schvyxer, Zilchon Ye Rubber Mage, Elilletha CubeRecursion. While being clever enough about it to justify it purely as self-deprecating humour, he addressed them like his favourite doujin artists (themselves a whole board on Punkin), in tones of almost pained admiration.

"How long have you..."

"I'm not saying, because if they give up they have to transfer me, right?"

"Has that... happened to you before?"

"Five times."

...In Elthazan, that was the maximum number before you got moved to the Specialized Care system.

She couldn't figure out why they would hesitate with a guy like this.

Maybe if Specialized Care was what they still made it look like on bad TV, a pre-psychological Heretics' Asylum the villains would scheme to put the heiress in. But she had





taken a medical reporting course at Yn Dahh't. It didn't even mean going anywhere. Sometimes they could put you in touch with a specialist in another country online. Or one might make arrangements to have you live on residence at their Academy, with all kinds of amenities, expenses paid out of their research budget, an indefinite vacation. Contact restrictions were a whole other thing and only used under extremely strict circumstances.

“Has anyone suggested a Specialized issue?”

If this just turned into her helping a guy who didn't know he could get Specialized Care get it, it might turn into more of a feel-good story than she had been planning.

Oh well. Gallvren would love it.

*Why do you always want to prove something's wrong, she'd ask over lemon-glazed biscuits and tea at midnight, why not make the most of living in a world where things are good most of the time?*

*Because even if you assume that, people don't need me to tell them what things are like most of the time. I'm interested in the rest of the time.*





*Sure, but maybe it's not what the Goddess wants you to do. Maybe you're not gonna find the special thing you're "needed" for anyway, so you can just do what you like.*

*But this is what I like, and I don't know how to make myself needed for it!*

Her cheek so close the rhi in the air tickled.

"Of course not. I mean, not since the last guy. There's nothing wrong with me, I'm just a pathetic piece of shit."

She'd been bracing for something like this, but something about his voice - a flippancy that both completely believed itself and knew what it sounded like, detectable even through a dazed stiffness like reading a script for the first time - still stung.

"In the sense of choosing to, or of being innately?"

"Oh man... Is this all just to trap me into saying a Heresy?"

What? Maybe he did believe Specialized Care still meant getting locked up in a spooky abbey. "Obviously if I say innate I'm just trying to parse your internal perceptions, I'm not taking it as a consistent belief."



He blinked. "...are *you* a psychologist?"

"No."

"Then I don't believe you. Only a psychologist is allowed to ask that."

"That sounds like something someone would say in an Inquisition drama from the last postwar era. Did someone... tell you that?"

"Isn't that where psychology comes from? You know that, right? I'm not talking to some common-permission fake news site or Domesday "reporter" am I? All this for" -

"Shut up!" His attitude had completely changed, although he sounded more like he was talking to himself than her, talking offstage like in a bad play. "I know the origins but like... you were just telling me about Shunny Najda, the man whose entire career is built on plausibly deniable heresies, let alone things you just say in conversation because you don't mean literally."

"I know all about things you just say in conversation because you don't mean literally. I do that all day on Feed. I thought this was going to be something different!"





“Well then what you just said, taken literally, is plainly heretical!” Every human being, every form of matter, you learned from the age of theoretical reason at 7, could be described in terms of its elements, Chaos and Order, the Serpent and the Goddess, the Serpent of fire born at the outer edge of the world, the endless dark circumference, coiling in yearning love toward the Goddess, self-producing symmetry, infinitely complex and infinitely simple fractal dancing at the centre of the world. The Order of the Goddess was Good, and every human who occupied the position of the Serpent in striving towards Her had the inalienable potential and drive for good, as it was implicit in their very imperfection. As far as Marzanna was concerned, the Ecclesia could hammer out the metaphysics endlessly - *every human being* was the important part. And of course no one would call heresy on that in an everyday context either, people called each other stuff like that all the time on Punkin, on Feed, on the chans. Journalists if anyone still had a lot of language taboos that the internet had lifted. Heresy wasn't even an actionable category in most contexts other than public distribution regulations and military courts. The kinds that the Inquisition still concerned itself with were very clearly defined as Dark beliefs.





“Yes, and you can’t force me to be theologically specific enough for it to be enforceable. Protection of Disordered Individuals Act 37A. You’ll know that if you’re a real journalist right?”

OK, damn it, that was on the books here. He could have heard it from a psychologist, or from edgy shitposters online. “Uhh, good catch, now I know you’re awake. Where’d you learn this?”

Luskonneg blinked again to distract himself from the fact that the man looked more like an egg (the shape of his face) or a chicken (the staticky wattle of hair off the middle of his forehead). “Tell me - has your curriculum reached the origins of modern psychology yet? Or have you watched any dramas like *Endless Ward*?”

Luskonneg started coughing to suppress his derision and ended up hyperventilating. Not that he really had any idea what was supposed to be so bad about *Endless Ward* but he’d overheard even people in his class making fun of it and the screenshots had ugly lighting that made everything sort of look like it was inside a snowglobe in an over-lit room and his mom went into a glaze-eyed trance





in front of it at 3:00 in the morning when he was supposed to be sleeping. When those clipped, upturned voices flickered under the door was the only time he could make noise, even walk right past her. “I prefer... the books.”

That wasn't true but he had read on Choreopedia that even Najda was influenced by Yukhil Tsyo, the pioneer of Inquisitorial mystery who had branched out into psychological mystery at the end of his life. And the show he had been

“No - I mean - yes but I wasn't paying any attention.” By now Luskonneg could sit through most of an entire lecture, eyes open and staring ahead, basically not seeing or hearing anything. It would be a kind of cool trick if he could explain what it even was, let alone how to do it. He thought of it as a kind of lucid dreamlessness.

“Hmm, well just let me know if you already know something.”

He was starting to do it now, to get away from the egg-chicken-man, the image becoming too distracting. In class the black pocket was big enough to just absorb his anxieties, a cavernous pool where he could watch them circle like sharks and beat them away with the weak flashlight





of his self-awareness without the punishing video game grind spilling over into his physical surroundings.

“It developed from the Inquisition. Not, as you might expect, just as a way of getting more accurate confessions. It was because in dealing with heretics, they found they had to distinguish heresies from ordinary thought patterns. Amongst each other, they started seeing heresies built into ordinary thought patterns. Clerics had always had the opportunity to observe this in confessions, particularly the Analytic Confession, but it was only after Inquisitors started interrogating each other recreationally that they could systematically begin to determine all the folds, all the iterations.”

*Smack.* The flat of the flame-bladed, flame-heated Inquisitorial sword fell across the naked slope of the [Taboo Preserver]’s back, left a mark like a train track, a sward of singed hair. Fat quivered and flinched.

“Don’t misunderstand. None of this means I blame you. As little as you’ve told us, I can only imagine, a woman like Rraitha Braz, an aristocrat, a fossil of the old world... they aren’t used to seeing from the Serpent’s head, pushing





through the blind storm of their own Chaos to arrive at the truth of themselves and their duties. They think they can still stand in the position of the Goddess, can dance Her dance and know Her Order as their mere peace, their certainty.”

“This isn’t about... politics or theology or whatever. It’s just... my fault. My fault like it was before. I brought it back with me.”

*Smack.* Strange and wonderful shapes and colours raced across the uncharted walls of his interior city, the dizzying underground where he fell behind. Somewhere, a wish that Braz could see him, maybe even somehow that she could be the one to purify him of herself, fell past him into the endless dark, escaping the Inquisitor’s sight. “And ours. We didn’t grasp that the [Taboo Preserver] would need such further training in the recognition, the pursuit of the Order you protect - of which you are the cornerstone. They dress you up in these trappings, this title, as if you yourself were some passive ceremonial object, some... mystic courtesan of old Silmenon or C’harn. But you are a masterpiece of the Order that can only be uncovered by the Serpent’s striving, and the application of the Goddess’ Order to that striving - the culmination of the discover-





ies of scientific psychology, scientific magic. Our fault was that we thought you would not have to participate in the work yourself. So work with us. Identify your fault, explain it.”

The point of the sword tickled the underside of Ymaññ’s chin. A warm, wet volume balanced in the hammock of his pants, then fell stepwise...

A dog’s snout lifted the Inquisitor by the back of the neck. Another gripped the sword - showing no reaction to the heat - the third held its long jaws open sideways around his gut.

“No, no, it’s... OK, I requested this, remember?”

The dogs were silent. The one with the sword shook its head, ears swinging gently. The one holding up the merely-startled-looking Inquisitor turned and set him down on the edge of a divan set far back into the curtains. The third picked up a square of silk stitched with swallows in its mouth and started mopping up the pillows around Ymaññ’s buckled knees.

“I um. Ahem. I hope my comments about the archaic world weren’t taken as referring to the honourable beasts pres-





ent. That's a human distinction between humans; you have your ways and so much of our great struggle is still to approach their perfection in our own appropriate form."

The one that had picked him up growled deep from within the coils of its ribs, like huge stones grinding together.

"In any case, I may have gone a bit too far. But you don't look catatonic as you did before." Ymañ lifted up his eyes to where the cool glare of small frameless glasses had settled on him again. The Inquisitor brushed dander and flecks of saliva off his red vest and bulging hat. "Are you ready to begin the difficult movement of revisiting and letting go of your feelings for Rraihha Braz?"

"Well yeah," Marzanna corrected measuredly, "although it was important that they were talking to industrial mages outside the Ecclesia too, and applying the same principles of systematization to the raw observation that had been accumulating in Ecclesiastical records for centuries. And Miwa too, we played - sorry, I got my diploma from a monastery - a significant role. This sounds like a kind of Ecclesiastical-biased account - is that where they were from?" The Kingdoms and the Ecclesia had their own separate





psychiatric guilds, although they shared some of the same pools of public resources and were governed by the same professional norms.

“...I don’t know.”

“*Don’t know?* Well, did you get referred through a family doctor, or school, or Confession?”

“School. I had one through my family doctor before but they made me get another one.”

“...that sounds extremely unusual, do you have records?”

“Oh Goddess. Probably my mom does. Or some of them might be in the boxes under...” *that would take like half a day to search, and nuke the closet. It wasn’t like I would have anywhere to put things back.*

Even then, Marzanna thought, it was unusual to hear an Ecclesiastical account that privileged the Inquisition over the Confessional that much. At least from a psychologist *promoting* the approach.

“I- I don’t have to be Ecclesiastical about it, if that’s triggering. I can ask the same question in Miwa concepts, actually.” The Miwa Synod had officially incorporated their





own psychiatric guild no more than thirty years ago - just three and half before Marzanna was born - and she would have to be careful to be careful of trespassing on their licensed territory now, let alone that of their When you say you're a pathetic piece of shit, is that Swimming or Current?"

"Uhhhh - remind me what either of those mean..."

"According to Maullan's Derivations, all sins and heresies can be shown to be incoherent movements from Chaos to Order, from the Serpent to the arms of the dancing Goddess. The incoherent movement appears to lead towards the Goddess - for example, towards her afterimage in the Dance - but remains in Chaos. An incoherent movement, of course, is a failed fragment of Order - its own true Order can be derived from its start and end points and redirected. It is, in one of Maullan's more colourful images, the onanism of the Serpent."

"Onanism? Like when..."

"Yes, exactly like that."





“Does that mean people shouldn’t... my health class said...”

“What do you think?”

“Well, if the form of all sins and heresies is onanism, maybe onanism is implanting the sins and heresies in my brain... Is this all happening because I... I... sometimes, when I’m in my room alone and I can hear mom is sleeping I -”

Yukhil Tsÿo was also the author of the lesser-known stories, published in an underground journal, that had been adapted more recently to the web-only animation *Ero-Guro Puzzlebox*. It wasn’t that erotic, or that grotesque, but he didn’t know if he could handle that much either and as soon as a collar began to slip down exposing a long scar he-

“Well, you didn’t want to admit you had those fifteen minutes ago. Very good.”

“But wait. If I do. Why are you asking me questions? Why are you trusting me? Why do you think it matters what I think you mean? Will you tell me if I make a mistake?”





“You grasp the root of the problem correctly. It’s why you’re talking to me, not an ordinary person, not even a Cleric. The Inquisition, after all, weren’t good enough to figure out people like you, couldn’t find their way through to people who lied to themselves before lying to others. Not as profound as the lies to yourself that would open you onto the Dark, but of the same form. But see - am I correct in assuming you just told me something you wouldn’t have told me four or five minutes ago?”

Luskonneg blinked.

“And the only information you have to go on is what I say, and you don’t trust me. You shouldn’t trust me, if I have hidden sins and heresies in my head.” Luskonneg tensed as he leaned forward in the stretch-marked blackberry vinyl easy chair, in anticipation of nothing.

In *Ero-Guro Puzzlebox* there was a Dark sect that used a both-chicken-and-egg symbol to represent the secret principle they held above both Goddess and Serpent. He had kept his laptop in bed after turning off the lights so his mom couldn’t see that it wasn’t on his desk and rolled over with his back to the door and held it open in the tent the blanket made between his back and the wall. It had been a great plan and he’d had to close it like ten times





he'd been so nervous and now it was like this doctor's face had appeared to punish him, or escaped from the gap in reality created by his hiding.

*Man, that one was kind of similar to the thing that happened with the skull recently, he remembered in a cutaway of lucidity.*

He wondered what that "Seer In The Half Light" had to say about Yukhil Tsÿo. They must have had a favourite adaptation. There were probably pages about it on the site he hadn't looked at. Had *they* seen Ero-Guro Puzzlebox?

The flaming skull was there again and he squinted and was staring back at the face in his screen (uncomfortably cute and uncomfortably ugly at the same time, as much as its obscene detail was thankfully censored by the low resolution of the webcam and the spit flecks and finger oil on his screen) as he remembered. The memory not only a reference for the concepts he was trying to find as little of his way around as he needed to, but a weird unavoidable sort of resonance itself, which meant he was in another trap, a trap that could take months or years to spring, unlike the ones he had walked into recently. (And hadn't all this, from the outage to the video to the interview, all been one trap?) Ironic, as exactly what he was trying to remember right now was how he had gotten through it, gotten used





to it, the day after day year after year everything traps. And this had been part of it - the not seeing the face in front of him the way he didn't see the desks and the chalkboard, the reservoir of darkness. He kept calling it different things and wouldn't remember any of them when he surfaced from it.

"Yes, but those sins and heresies have limited forms, that we have discovered scientifically. At least those of normal people, who don't give in to the Dark."

"And how do you know I won't give in to the Dark?"

"You're worried about it, aren't you?"

Was he? He'd been thinking about this just last night when he'd been watching - *why* did he watch that right before seeing a new therapist? Maybe because it would give him something to talk about, maybe because he wanted to convince himself that the thoughts about "ero" and "guro" weren't necessarily Dark things, maybe because he didn't want to spend a week thinking *maybe at least the Dark would be something* -



“Can I ask you something...” Ymaññ struggled, lifting his lungs like weights... “that never made sense to me. The Dark Lord... half the thoughts I can remember from him when I wake up, and they stick with me, they stick to me and my memories, like a bad taste from food in my mouth.”

“Mm-hmm.” The Inquisitor sounded unimpressed even though Ymaññ hadn’t said anything to be impressed with yet.

“...are about the Dark, what would make him Dark, what would happen if he was Dark, the Dark within him already. He’s terrified of it, he hates it. If we can do that, if we can make the Lord of the Dark fear and hate the Dark, why can’t we... just change him. Just turn him, just let him live a normal life, or even use his powers for good or whatever instead of this. I’m sorry, I know I should have asked this earlier, I didn’t really like thinking about it that hard when I joined but now she’s gone and you’re here and it feels like I have to anyway.”

The Inquisitor whistled like a split straw and rubbed the edge of the blade on his stubble. “That’s all? They sure picked a dumb one this time, no wonder you fell in love with your handler or whatever it is I’m here for. Goddess - when we’re in charge again it won’t be like this.”





Ymaññ reddened. He still couldn't accept that it was love. Why did clinging and blushing have to mean love. Why weren't those the stakes of every relationship for everyone. Let alone someone who lived in a top secret room in a labyrinth sleeping all the time. But he'd been OK with the room and the sleeping because it was already like that. Because if everything was like that there was no point in distinguishing love anyway. He rubbed his stubble in sympathy with the blade.

“The Dark knows hate. The Dark knows fear. It knows nothing better than those things. It can even direct them against Itself. But It knows nothing else. The moment It derives a sense of Order, of the Form of the Goddess that allows It to approach Her, of the Will of the Serpent that drives the approach, It will undo every stitch, follow us all the way back... Our entire strategy, from General Martolod's first memo, has been to turn the Dark against Itself at Its own heart.”

*“So don't lose hope. As long as you keep doubting yourself, you'll never lose yourself to the Dark.”*

The Goddess and the Serpent spoke at once.



Luskonneg gulped what felt like a silver ball of air into his throat.

“But here, tell me everything, be fully yourself, and I will be your mind’s loyal opposition.”

“I know about those. Current and Swimming.” His voice was determined, not quite his own, falling on himself from miles away, like sky at the top of a chasm. “In certain Miwa traditions” - his vocal mannerisms were falling back into that man's - “you can divide your “self” into Current and Swimming. The Current is something that simply happens; Swimming is something you have to keep exercising. Importantly, this has nothing to do with which one you identify with: things that come from the Current can be some of the most important parts of you, and you can Swim in a wrong direction, even knowing it’s the wrong one!”

*“Is one the Goddess and one the Serpent,” Luskonneg had asked dully.*

*“Well, think of it this way. If you’re the Goddess, there’s no distinction. Your Current and your Swimming are the same dance. The distinction exists because on one hand, all sorts of momen-*





*tary Currents spawn from Chaos, and on the other, there's his love for her, which is a deeper Current, but he has to Swim to follow." Luskonneg nodded like a bobbing puppet. "Now, there's also the question of Swimming with or against the Current - the one saves energy, the other wastes it."*

"Yeah, that's about right." Very much the way a kid would phrase it on a high school essay, but deceptively well-founded, she pounded out in Notes app.

"So," in a more naive voice, as if answering what if... like... you don't have any good Current."

Luskonneg/Dr. Mark'eg furrowed his brow. "Well, what do you mean by good?"

The journalist furrowed it back. "That uhhh, sounds like depression. Did you ever get meds for that?"

"I did, they took away even the little bit of good Current I could get, like when I watched anime."

"Hmmm. I hear more about that with antipsychotics, do you remember what it was called?"





“N-no, I think I scratched it out of my mind, Za-something, I tried to look it up.” He had even started a thread to ask on /psy/ but he wasn’t going to summon those anons back into his head.

“Zeparmine?” It had been discontinued from public production and even the Apothecary ten years earlier, but you could still get it through some Specialized Care labs that had research supplies. It had been billed as both an anti-depressant and an antipsychotic, and used a magically altered microdose of the umbrella-shaped flower known in Miwa tradition as “The Firmament of the Skull”.

“I think... I think... I can’t tell you. I can’t see the letters on the memory any more. So I can’t confirm any statement about it.”

Marzanna was taking notes in greentext because it was the only way she could think in words fast enough to keep up. “That’s a... very particular way of talking about yourself.”

“I’m good at paying attention to my thoughts now. I did *a lot* of therapy.”





“I never used the word good. Did you mean good as in aligned with the Goddess, or as in pleasurable feelings? There’s another prevailing answer to your previous question, as it were, that I wasn’t telling you. The Current, right or wrong, springs from the depths of Chaos, at least relative to us - it *is* the Serpent as He manifests in us, and its drive towards the Goddess is ours. But we can only reach Her, only separate the right and wrong Currents, by Swimming.”

“I had... pleasurable feelings... last night.”

“So you do have good Current,” the hard-boiled eyes in the egg-head swivelled. “Now you see why I ask you questions, even if I can’t trust you, so I can catch you in a lie.”

Had that really counted? Luskonneg’s face went hot and liquid, like the surface of the planet reverting to its primordial crust.

On the pillow, it was starting to rise and fall like a poorly inflated air mattress.

“I watched an episode of some stupid show.” He hadn’t managed to do the other thing after all. He was still trying to do it with his mind. B-bu-but, that isn’t, good. Mom says





it isn't good when I watch that stuff, she says" (what stuff? He tried to remember the criteria, if there were criteria, he had no idea), "that I don't *really* like it."

"It's not just her you don't understand. I don't understand her. I've never claimed to understand her. I don't even want to argue about her. I gave up trying to understand the way you're telling me to that time... it was too far for me, too hard for me, I can't live the way you're asking me to, but she didn't ask me. It's like in *The beauty of the Goddess is like a melody that comes to me on the harp.... that I cannot remember where I first heard and at first I believe I just invented it, until I remember Elthazan playing it around the fire that scabbled like a child's hand at the Dark Lands. And then I remember that melody did not begin with Elthazan either, or with whoever taught it to him. It has always been there, in the very possibility of form, dancing into appearance here and there, remembered out of the Chaos of a mind. We can reach for Her, we know how, because She reaches out to us, inevitably, in the act of dancing through every corner of the universe. There is no void too far for Her.*"





“Was your mother the only one you grew up with?”

“Dad died... at the office. He always worked really long hours. Not because anyone made him. Something like me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For a few years, Mom thought he had just run away and was trying to open an investigation. I didn’t believe it had happened until I was like ten.”

And because he couldn’t watch something that wasn’t good when he was also trying to be good, he only watched it when it brought some Current stronger and thicker and redder than good to the surface.

And what even was good? The icons of the Goddess at the Ecclesia on Sundays when mom could drag herself out, the horrible turning sameness of the crystals in the light? It wasn’t a Current, so it was Swimming but Swimming towards what?

“But I thought you said we should always Swim with the Current. So, if I had some good Current before the meds, I should have tried to Swim with it somehow, right? What





would that... look like? Just watching stuff I like would be like, just letting the Current take me, right?”

“Well, what happens if you just feel the Current and don’t do anything?”

“...nothing.”

“Well, how about this. If you don’t make any distinction between doing the thing and feeling the Current, and a Current wants to do something, what do you do?”

“...nothing. It’s still hard. I still have to try.”

“So if you’re in a bad Current, you just don’t have to do anything.”

“But how do I make myself have a Current to do good things. Like talk to people. What if it just never happens.”

“We have some idea what the Currents are now. They’re a chemical thing, reactions, that resonate with ambient rhi.” Marzanna was trying to puzzle this out still - had they really not touched his meds at all between a recalled novelty drug and whatever they had him on now, which had to be pretty vicious with the way he kept zoning out? “That still sounds like depression. So with school, like people stuff,





you would just hang back to yourself, not do anything you weren't told, nothing that drew attention to your... issues?"

"When I was on the Za... not gonna call it anything else." His eyes flashed to the side as if checking with someone. "The next guy wanted to let me try because I wanted to get good at it."

"But let you try, completely unmedicated."

His stare was hazy, no longer through but above her, and almost nostalgic. "How else would it be try?"

"That's what it always was, music and reading and everything else I do here, that was enough for me, that was why I came here. I didn't want to do what you guys are so obsessed with - I didn't want to try, I didn't want to reach, didn't want to strive, didn't want to struggle. And since love would have been that, even friendship I was fine with . But that wasn't what it was with Rraihha.

"You wanted to be a woman." The Inquisitor's eyes flashed with sudden understanding, and Ymaññ wondered for a





second if the world had changed while he was in here in ways he couldn't understand. For an Inquisitor to identify the Hierogamy with gender this simply, and in a way that contradicted what he had already heard of their framework... all humans were more Serpent than Goddess in relation to Her infinity and perfection, and abandoning the sibyllic authority, this could only mean leaving the category of woman empty of the human content that had pressed so warmly against his shoulder, introducing ancient melodies from the midwinter rituals of a C'harnian great house to his plastic keys until the smell of juniper candles seemed to fill the air... cold as he preferred to be cold and open when he was alone.

"No, the receiving is also a moment of the Serpent. And there's a moment of the Goddess who journeys towards you, Silmenon himself called Her the Beautiful Questioning Girl."

"Don't lecture an Inquisitor on Hierogamy. What, did you get that from a Domesday video?"

"The last [Taboo Preserver] left me a whole library, remember? I read stuff here too. That's what I started talking to her about, you know."





“You’re having fun making that kind of face for the first time, huh? Never done it in your life, not even when she was here, and now that you’ve fucked up the most important job in the world you act like you get to make that face. Maybe we should get rid of that library. You aren’t really just waiting innocently for Her if you’re reading - *The eyes creep like the Serpent along the page.*”

“Did you do your schoolwork? Were you more functional on your own? Were you OK with your teachers?”

“That went, too. I was really absorbed in math for a few years. Then they started introducing these... trick problems, in fonts that made it hard to look at the page. My mom would ask for accommodations. They’d make it worse. I just stopped doing more than I needed to not get held back. The meds made it easier to see how little things were worth to me.”

His monotone sounded like he was dictating to some disinterested scribe. That had to be how he could manage talking to her this long, she realized, by being completely somewhere else. Head to the side on his pillow, like he was



talking himself to sleep, staring down the insect tunnel of his ear.

“So what did you spend most of the day doing?”

“...things. Movements, itches, stress positions, hurting myself, things I had to do over and over again. Trying to start new things Mom thought I should try instead. And... I got on this. It was the only thing that felt like nothing in a good way.”

Oh that was a *pull-quote*.

“What parts of the internet?” This was starting to pull into her wheelhouse.

“Anything that had games and anime, anything that had people talking about things that I would recognize, which was mostly that. 42chan. Panopticon. I’ve had so many accounts on here, you have no idea, since I was 12. Every time anyone would get mad at me about anything,” he chuckled from some warm depth for the first time she’d seen, even... smiled? “I’d just make a new one and come at them saying the opposite thing. I just used it like 42chan.”





She blinked. She'd heard *stories* like this before but  
“Wait, how did you do that, Feed uses your Ley-pose.”

“Right. Oh, ahhh, shit. Just a weird spell-program I found  
on /mat/ one night. It's not in any of the archives, they  
patched it up a few years ago, I don't have it any more, I  
don't remember it -”

That was all plausible and there were archives of patches  
she had privileges to check but it was exceptional for an  
exploit to stay active that long, that a kid randomly stum-  
bling around public boards could have found, and without  
any reverse spell locating its users.

....

“I don't know where to start. It's too many. It's too much.”

“Well, where would you like to start. Are there any...  
would you term grievances? Things that were done wrong,  
for you specifically.”

“What, like getting bullied or some shit? Yeah it happened  
but... I didn't sign up to talk about that. You could find  
someone normal who was bullied and people would be sad  
and angry about.”







Marzanna paused and took more notes. She had heard her fair share of bullying stories, from either side, on Puntkin; a few she could have made into stories, and hadn't because... people would obviously get sad and mad about them. It would be within the world they expected, albeit an exception to that world. The cases in which journalists were allowed to report on those directly instead of compiling them for the relevant mediating bodies - for which they could be rewarded as well as for a successful public story - were narrow anyway.

"...peep- I mean- things!"

"Are you *trying* to lie? Make no mistake - you can't lie to me on purpose. You're doing it so much to yourself that it'll come out backwards."

"No literally I tried to say the wrong word." He already couldn't remember if this was true or not.

"So you want to talk to someone? What do you want to talk to them about?"





“I don’t know. People say it would be good if I did! And it seems to make other people happy, so maybe it would.” It wasn’t so much that he wanted to, as that he couldn’t prove it wouldn’t make him happy, so he held onto the possibility that it might.

“Do words ever come as a Current? Fully formed?”

“That I’d want to say to someone? Yeah, and then when I try it’s like the Current - turns around.”

“Turns around? There isn’t another Current - a thought, a feeling?”

“No, it’s the same as the original Current, equal and opposite - it’s not even a Current, it’s not even anything, I just can’t. It’s like a mirror - an invisible wall.”

The psychologist’s glasses were like a mirror, or an invisible wall, mercilessly transparent so that he could reach across them and not touch.

With what? What was he even referring to in the first -

The invisible wall slammed back into his face.





“And then there’s usually another one and it’s... worse. And they get worse and worse the longer I can notice them.”

Eyes. If you could reach through the glass - if you could break the glass - if you could break the mirrored surface up with its own blood - like an egg smashed with a chicken inside.

“Is everything all right? Your eyes look kinda red.”

He squinted his eyes closed so hard when he reopened them the red placenta of capillaries at their back was splattered all over his swimming vision. Layered with fluorescent green like retro screen glare.

“Not just Currents but a storm, sweeping over everything. And the whole storm is just ripples on a big wave in a bigger -“

“And about how often does this happen a day.”

“Every time I try to talk to someone if I don’t like, know the exact words, so I can kind of close my eyes and skip between the Current coming up and the words coming out my mouth.”





“You speak to people with your eyes closed.”

“I- I think? Maybe?”

“What’s the difference between that and here?” The doctor’s voice was stern. Did that mean he was lying again?

His eyes weren’t even open any more, were they?

“I’m *supposed* to talk to you.”

“What’s *supposed* to? What happens if you don’t? What happens differently when you Swim in it?”

“If I don’t I want to die.”

“That sounds like a very useful thing, to be able to impose on yourself.”

He had never thought of it that way before. “But I can’t.” He took a few more seconds loading. “Impose it on myself, I mean.”

“So does someone else impose it on you?”

“...I don’t know. I guess my mom or teachers sometimes, but it’s not like it always happens with either of them. It feels more like it’s already happened.”





“What you seem to be telling me is that there’s a negative Current, a powerful enough negative Current to break through your “invisible wall”. Which would fit your story of not experiencing positive Current at all.”

“Yeah! That makes sense!” Maybe all these weird metaphors were going to help somehow after all. Except what could he do with that? “But that’s the problem, isn’t it? I can’t make these Currents, positive or negative. And I need them to Swim.”

“All right. But as we’ve established, you’ve been in Currents you haven’t identified. And if you don’t Swim in them, nothing happens - you might never know they were there. That’s why I want you to pay very careful attention to them. ...If I told you you were *supposed to* talk to one person this week, who would you pick?”

“No one. I mean, there’s no one in particular. I can’t say who I want to talk to because I haven’t talked to anyone. ...Isn’t it dishonest to just start talking to people if you have no idea if you’ll be interested in them? ...For me it’s more like, I know I probably won’t be interested in them, because I’m probably never going to be interested in anything.”





“Well, it’s a bit like jumping into a Current you can’t see.”

“That sounds like something that’d get you killed! ...But some of them are starting to do lewd things already, so maybe that’s what it’s really about. They pretend to want to jump in a Current that might get them killed because it might let them do lewd things.”

“...that’s one theory, yes. Although it’s more popular in Silmenon” - he wrinkled his nose slightly - “than here.”

*Just like my Silmenonian animes!* cackled the meme voice in his head. His mom wrinkled her nose almost the same way when she caught him watching them. Was that why they made stuff like *Ero-Guro Puzzlebox*? But people in those were also really honest a lot of the time in ways other people on the internet said were unrealistic. They were also making passionate commitments of friendship to people they had no interest in doing lewd things with, although other people on the internet liked imagining if they did.

“The journeyman cleric in health class says wanting to do lewd things is supposed to come from talking to people... was that backwards?”



“No, that’s a correct coiling of the Hierogamy. But he also told you that you need to know someone’s comfort level with or conditions for talking about lewd things to a high level of context before you talk about them about them, so it doesn’t just “come from” that one way.”

The internet appealed to Luskonneg, he thought, because he didn’t have “talk to”, just “talk at” people, and if they got tired of it they could just block him without acting like he was forcing them to care.

Luskonneg nodded. “But-but also I heard someone else saying it’s weird to think about it with someone you talk to... so it doesn’t make sense how anyone starts with either of those things!”

“So you don’t talk to people, but you hear them saying this?”

Luskonneg startled back, as if he could have been caught in a lie so deep it would implicate its own sentences. “Yes? W-we were, walking together, on the field trip. Never mind. Don’t believe me. I don’t believe me.” He wasn’t sure if his voice sounded aggressive or scared. We were actually talking about uhhh, who we’d like to,”





“That’s not what I have in my notes from either your parents or your teachers, and if you were talking you could have just asked them. Don’t make this more difficult.”

He fell silent, collected himself. “I just... eavesdrop. Sometimes.”

“And do you ever eavesdrop on a conversation you want to join?”

“I think I have but I can’t remember any of them. Just the feeling of wanting and then that getting so loud I can’t hear the conversation or even remember it when it’s over.”

“Is it possible that you’ve wanted to do lewd things from eavesdropping?”

“From... from...” He was melting and skipping.

“What if I told you you were supposed to pick something you wrote down, something you found interesting, and talk to that person about it.”

“Wait how would they know... I know... they know... about the thing. Also none of them are interesting.”





“What did you even talk about. A sheltered military aristocrat and a sheltered spell rotator. The curve of the world outside?”

The dogs took turns licking Ymañn’s back and he winced where the saliva stung. The Inquisitor sat imperiously again on the arm of the couch. “It started out like... well, when she’d come to collect her notes on my dreams. She would stay and let me talk about my life here, just let me explain things. Like I used to do on Panopticon, like I did with the dogs for years.”

“The dogs weren’t enough? You’re framing this as something you only did for yourself - to see the Order inside you take shape, or less charitably, to hear the sound of your own voice.”

“Ahhhh I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry!” He started banging his head on the pillows until one of the dogs picked him up by the scruff of his neck again - not the back of the shirt, which was removed, but teeth gently gripping around the flesh of his neck without piercing, laying him down on the couch at the Inquisitor’s feet while another slunk its heavy head across his torso to keep him from moving. The Inquisitor fidgeted awkwardly. “I didn’t mean to... but there is a difference, right?” He looked up at the





dog that had set him down. They blinked. “Language. Here I can just explain things the way I would in my head, you understand them the way you understand me. With her I could see how much she already knew, and make new pieces, new shapes, and fit them together - the conversation itself was the discovery of Order. I already said some of this in the...” wincing at the thought: “application, didn’t I?”

“The application in which you said you were mature enough to accept all this without compromising your mission, yes.” The Inquisitor glanced back at the sword and the dog still holding it lifted it higher into the gauzy skylight. “We believed you even in spite of your previous history.”

“I’m” - he squinted, tensed; the dog’s nose poked the underside of his chin. “I didn’t *want* anything but for things to continue the way they were.”

“Neither did she.

“But I already feel all sorts of things like that.” Tears were rolling down his cheeks now. “I don’t know if I did the right thing, or if I’ll die wondering about the life I could have had, the Dark Lord’s thoughts get into my mind, and I feel bad for him and wonder about other ways to con-



tain him, or get mad at him and want to kill him, all this ugly Chaos that comes up in Confession and therapy but doesn't go back down like when I'm with her. It all contradicts the mission. Why is this worse to just live with? Why can't the wrong things cancel each other out."

"It isn't. You act against all those, and you act with this, because it's good, yes? If the other wrong things went away, this wouldn't. A wrong goodness is worse than a wrong pain, because it can't be healed. It must be cut out at the root, and I believe you're still hiding that from me. But we can take this as slowly - and yes, painfully - as you need."

"Thank you," he choked, "thank you," to the dogs, "please don't protect me any more, it's fine, it's fine... Next week, Dr. Mark'eg?"

"Oh no. This is an urgent investigation. They've given me your inverse sleep tracking," the Major Doctor Inquisitor held up a paper seal whimsically as he gazed up into the skylight. "I'll be back next time you're due to be awake for more than three hours."

"And so, did you?"





“Over and over. Exhaustively. Until I saw every single path I could take and had ended all of them. I could... do this week after week, maybe, if you wanted. It could be a column. A collection of short stories. A... don't. I don't want anyone to hear

“That sounds like it would take quite a bit of will, which usually helps, but see... it's not a path. There isn't an end state. There's just treating people as people and living alongside them. This is a mistake a lot of people make.” On Punkin, at least - she almost wanted to say, but still couldn't tell from his Feed if he was one of the 50% of people like him who would identify with them or despise them.

“Then why are you asking me? Why isn't it OK for me to live like this?”

“Well, I don't know that it isn't. Is it, for you?”

“That's not even... a question with a real answer.” It produced its answer when asked - waves of aching Current, of wanting something that he had simply tried so hard to get even though he didn't know what it was, couldn't keep an image in his head. Waves that dissolved into spray. Spray that might have been arterial, blood in the waves.



A tall and angular girl, her face a sort of diamond. Her hair a bristle-mop of black so dull it looked like plastic. She could bend her fingers back really far. She wore shirts with daringly deep collars because there was nothing there.

She had once given everyone in the class invitations to a birthday party, then rescinded almost all of them the next day because her parents couldn't have that many people over. The few that she weren't had reputedly gone to all the quiet awkward kids in class except Luskonneg.

Luskonneg would look around the room and, if he couldn't hear anything anyone was saying, keep himself awake and outside himself by systematically imagining sexual encounters with everyone, letting the sum of the letters on the left side of the handout decide the object of his fantasies based on a numbering system. She had come lowest at first in his ranking of expectation, and had moved to highest just from how tense that awareness made him. He imagined picking up and being picked up by her back and forth.

She was last on his list of people he should try to talk to, because usually he sat in the lunchroom on his own,





starting and destroying doodles around the models of his notebook, the line shaking by accident then on purpose, and tried to listen in on the conversations around him. Since he got off the meds, which allowed him to sometimes forget things he had done at the cost of an almost total short-term amnesia about everything else (the real thing his mom had wanted him off them for) he had managed to attach two or three fragmentary sentences to almost everyone in the class, except for her and the kids who went up on the rooftop.

He sat trying to listen, flipping through his notebook, starting at the flickers of sentences, trying to notice Currents.

It felt like trying to pin down tadpoles in moving water.

*...wouldn't those be moving in the Currents themselves?* Swimming, for that matter, but he was the one who was supposed to Swim, right? He couldn't Swim because he couldn't feel the Current.

The metaphor wasn't making sense any more. But part of him was taking it literally and even the letters on the page seemed to be swimming. He put his head down and let meaningless words scrape up and down against the edges of his skull.



His food was curdling, rotting in his mouth. He couldn't swallow. He got up and bolted to the bathroom.

Luskonneg spat the half-chewed food into the sink, eyes avoiding the mirror as if one of the mysteries of the school was supposed to appear, before someone knuckled his head into it en passant - "Dude, can you do that somewhere else, like a rainbarrel or something?"

People did all kinds of things to him when he couldn't see them, to the point that a teacher had said it sounded like he was making up ghost stories, which maybe he was.

He put his hand out in front of him to push back the door that was swinging back on him. Let it go and turned back to the hallway and she was there.

He had three more days to go until his next session. He had been over all his fragment notes, found nothing, been trying to take more every day, although the more he tried the more rapids so maybe he was swimming against the Current or lying to himself again. Dr. Mark'eg had only asked him to talk to one person, and he knew that whenever he got that one in, that he was *supposed to*, he wouldn't be able to try with anyone else. That was the bargain of *supposed to*, that was how *supposed to* worked; vampiric,





it drained the Current from anything less than itself. That was why he did the bare minimum of homework he could get away with, staring blank-eyed and motionless at the paper under Mom's nose until the clock began to bite.

He had nothing to say to her, but if he didn't force himself now, he might never again.

Why was he thinking like this? It wasn't as if he wanted to talk to her or even do other things with her more than anyone else on his list, of which she was at the bottom. She hadn't even gone on his list of plausible targets. Maybe it was just the mystery of this encounter, the omen of it happening the first week he had to do something like this, that it was a "flag".

But weren't those kinds of things a manifestation of Order (that you were told not to interpret without professional guidance, but people in anime and plays and old books always did anyway)? Also hadn't Dr. Mark'eg pointed out all these times he was lying to himself?

Had he put her at the end of his list because he was really attracted to her? Had he left her off the list of candidates for the same reason? Was he what he had just figured out people on 42chan referring to as... a *tsundere*?





He felt, for some reason, that he couldn't be a *tsundere* because he didn't have the self-control. This was the same reason Dr. Mark'eg had told him not to try to talk to anyone he was too attracted to - which made her a natural candidate, except for everything that was happening now (he was half-consciously shadowing her down the hall). If he was a *tsundere* there was no way to trust himself to adjudicate this.

Well, he could pick someone boring in the middle, but it seemed to him that a sufficiently powerful falsifier could pick something out from the middle or worse - simply do the same in reverse. That was what it felt like, at first, when he started enjoying the fantasies of her. Like the way he would start to get more pleasure in his private onanism when it started to hurt.

But wasn't this just clashing Currents, again? Which had happened every time he'd tried to follow through on starting a conversation now, in fact it had become more and more obvious the more he was aware of it, a perfect loop of self-awareness: he'd think of something he wasn't sure about, derive the opposite extreme of the potential flaw, and get stuck between the two.





He shoulder-checked someone a few inches taller than him. “What the hell, man?”

He scooted reflexively three steps back, bumping into someone else. At the commotion she turned back, slightly alarmed gaze colliding with his like a halfhearted dodgeball.

His attraction, his trepidation, neither gave him a pretext to say anything that wouldn't be flagrantly breaking the rules from health class. The rapids of thought breaching the surface of his skin.

“Lus... Kennough? Did Ms. Preuddyfog send you or something? Tell her” -

...what was it *tsunderes* said? “I-it's not like I like you or anything!”

He realized what he had done wrong within seconds. The Public Morals Committee suspended him for the next three days.

“You let the negative Currents win.”





“But they didn’t feel like-“

“They didn’t get you what they wanted, did they?”

“I didn’t know what I wanted in the first place!”

“You didn’t want to get suspended.”

“That’s the fucking Public Morals Committee’s Fault.”  
(Looking back on it, this was the beginning of everything that happened with the Public Morals Committee.) “They don’t know shit about the Dance of the Goddess. They’ve never even seen a novel alternate theology refute itself, like on every other episode of *Ero-GurRRRPPP*.”

“On what? You can tell me anything here, same as in Confession. You already wouldn’t be telling anyone else any of this, right?”

“N-no. It’s an animated web show from Silmenon, inspired by Yukhil Tsÿo, the director was a staffer on-“

“That doesn’t mean I’ll necessarily care.” Dr. Mark’eg pushed his glasses up his face. “So the important part is, did you reverse your thoughts or your words? Did you like her or not?”





“How would I know?” This was the culmination of days of cold, driving thought during his suspension. “We never got to talk. And I wouldn’t have had anything to talk about.”

“So why were you guessing that and saying it backwards?”

“Because I guessed I was backwards in the first place!”

“From what?” He still hadn’t explained the fantasies because there was a fifty-fifty chance they would disqualify him from talking to anyone at all.

*You can tell me anything here, same as in Confession. You already wouldn’t be telling anyone else any of this, right?*

“...Currents...”

“*Positive* Currents?”

“No.”

“Then why did you guess backwards? See, you’re lying to me again. You can’t identify a Current that you reversed, *so the reversed Current was the original*. Except that as an original, it was already doubly reversed *from its intended ef-*





*fect*: to offend its object, by implying that you liked her. You can't go out on limbs like this."

"I wouldn't have if it weren't for you!" His neck muscles tensed, his lips flared and his consonants mashed like a little kid or sometimes his mom.

"Yes. We are performing experiments. If you don't follow the instructions exactly, they are going to be more dangerous than the neutral course of action."

"Then we should stop." Luskonneg's voice was trembling now, he was clutching his knees, like the boy around his age in *Ero-Guro Puzzlebox* who "Because I'm - really - bad at following instructions. I can get stuck on every single word in five, ten different directions. I'm never going to get it right."

"In that case, when you're in a position where you have no good options, pick the low-risk failures. The ones that simply remove yourself from the situation so you can try again."





“But eventually that selected all the way down to zero.” (He didn’t want to get into the stuff with the Public Morals Committee or anything yet, he didn’t know if he would be able to keep his cool.) “I can talk in situations like a psychologist’s couch or whatever this is. Not unconditional trust but like... dispassionate observation. That’s kinda what Feed is like too - even if people get mad at me, they’re letting me be there to get mad at. Like a big shooter lobby except I hate those. It’s part of the game.”

“Hmm. I’m still a bit confused about the way you talk about Currents - did the shrink who introduced you to that concept never talk about Eddies? How a big Current can have smaller sub-Currents in it that flow opposite the main one, and that sometimes when you’re doing the opposite of what you want - or even wanting the opposite of what you should - you’re stuck in an Eddy and you don’t have to Swim against it, just sideways until you find the real Current again?” She couldn’t explain what “Swimming sideways” was supposed to look like, she had doubts about whether she was any good at it herself, after all she was here, getting pulled into what was starting to feel like a whirlpool - but that was one of the things therapy was above all supposed to facilitate, because Swimming sideways could feel like Swimming blind.



"I saw that in a thread on /mo/ once, around when I stopped going. My therapist told me to read theories on this from anyone but him, there's too much misinformation."

"...maybe on 42chan, but if you go to a normal library, stuff is censored for accuracy. Not that there isn't lots of disagreement, but if you're not in a treatment yourself it's not unhealthy to expose yourself to that."

"I... I did. I argued with it, because it pissed me off." He laughed. "I got banned three times going in those threads, because it pissed me off so much! Don't tell me... don't tell me you're gonna piss me off too..."

"The problem here, and it's one I know you've been taught to identify, is that you're trying to prove two opposite things at once. That there was nothing special about your relationship, and that it was worth risking this much not to leave. And I suspect you're hiding selfishness as selflessness too - do you really believe in him so little that he couldn't have found some other way to resolve his loneliness? He'll certainly have to now."





Braz dragged a long inhale and exhale through pinched nostrils, spooled a long thread of light through pinched eyes.

“What’s most surprising to me is, in the C’harnian aristocratic tradition you grew up immersed in, there’s an abundance of stories and models of love tragically abandoned for duty, forgotten and persisting only in spells or signs, impenetrable interconnections. They get rewritten in plays for the comfortable masses today, but those songs are what set you apart in your interpretation of the law, the Scriptures, military duty...”

“Not those ones in particular, especially. But yes. It feels like... too much, to actually see myself in one of those. I can try to live up to them, but they don’t happen any more.”

Tserghan sighed and spun her pen, clacking between her fingers in polyrhythm with the train. “If they were to happen to anyone, they would happen to you.”

“You said you were a fan of my clearance exams - so why are you only focusing on the ethical ones, and not looking at Catch and Release?”





One of the subheadings of her mission effectiveness essay. Tserghan's eyes lit up. "Go on."

"Cowardice, envy, despair, the kinds of ordinary Chaotic thoughts that would undermine my duties in high-pressure situations, but don't necessarily disqualify me from them - I treated all other mission-inappropriate thoughts as belonging to this category. 'Catch and Release', and 'Limited Animation' is also relevant, the splitting thought into frames - I pluck them out of the Current, name them, and complete, balance or release them as needed. With Ulwenn the vast majority I was able to process into the higher Orders I convinced you of in the exemption applications. The rest... what was left of them by the time I would have needed to sacrifice anything? What could I truly say I 'needed', I 'felt'? I was only able to confess it at the end because it was such a paltry, empty word. An abstraction. Like the Magical Background Radiation they're theorizing in the Mysteries departments now. Enough to discount as zero each by itself, but heavier than the moon counted as one."

"...that's less Traditional terminology than I'd have expected you to use."





“I thought I’d always felt indifferent to these kinds of feelings because I’ve been able to reduce them like this. For people I find beautiful, or people I find admirable. However special the person, the things I desire or admire are just aspects of Order I can already strive to realize in myself, to the extent it matters to me. The ‘feelings’ that don’t go in those circuits were never enough to count by themselves. Maybe if they had been stronger it wouldn’t matter. The Seer In The Half Light I met... was beautiful, and melted me down in a way I haven’t been in decades, but that was in what we did, what I accepted. There wasn’t a desire fully contiguous from appreciation to the consummation, I had to jump into it, for my own reasons. And I did used to do that, until it stopped balancing out. I know Ulwenn feels the same and he never did.” She wouldn’t say anything he had told her about the one time. Even if that had been the final weight on the scales after all. If they wanted that out of her they’d get his permission. “In fact, I guess that’s one of the things about him. Maybe it feeds back, shorts out if two people look at each other through those same eyes, splitting each other into frames, knowing they can stop at any time.”



"All true lovers know that about each other. They don't crash into each other. They can stop, so they don't have to. That's the dance."

"...huh."

"None of this explains why you didn't leave as soon as you could count the feelings as one. You're still trying to explain this as if you didn't want anything. A bubble, protected from those feelings forever, or purified by one confession - did you really believe that?"

"...The Dark Lord is supposed to die at some point. The last one made it to what, forty-five? Ymañn Ulwenn went into this service to get away from the world. But then he'll have to come out again. I haven't - let myself finish a thought about what we'd do then, because that would be more than nothing. But it starts..."

"Well, sadly, that's a conflict of interest as much as a romantic entanglement in the presente. Wanting the Dark Lord to die too fast is the most common emotional liability we have to deal with among people who work on containment. Although this would be the first time someone's made him a love rival."





“...I don’t think about him like that, though. The Dark Lord, I mean. I don’t think about him much at all.”

“The way you don’t think about the [Taboo Preserver]?” Tserghan sensed her weakness.

And for a second she wavered - if she released the feelings without counting them - which was her mistake, that, exactly - how many more could... “No, I don’t even catch those.”

“Hm. And you think of the [Taboo Preserver]... how? Sex? Marriage? A horse and carriage? A boy to mother? An old man to nurse? Or some kind of hand-holding heroic haying each other’s backs?” Tserghan grinned at the possibilities.

The way the lump in his soft throat bobs when he catches a phrase to edit before speaking.

Breathe out.

The way he scratches his head when he’s embarrassed and shakes loose bits of dandruff and hair.

Breathe in.





The sea-ice shade of those eyes, like something C'harnian aristocrats would say about themselves in poetry except it wasn't true, or she couldn't see it as true, she only saw gunmetal.

The images were coming in a flood and leaking out the corners of her eyes.

Zero, one - uncountable.

She didn't know where to start counting.

"If you release the thoughts before you can complete them, you can't guide them to the right part of Order. And then they build up, right? ...When he's out your two-way age gap will be even bigger."

Tingling, dripping blush dropped across her face like a roller shade. The longer she hesitated, the worse Tserghan would make it. She spluttered into action:

"That's such a small part of it. A softness that doesn't feel indulgent to sink your hands into, to grind against, to... knead." What was she saying? What were these words? The edges of her incomplete fantasies were closing in on her like a whirlpool. "The thing I was saying earlier about de-





sire... It makes sense for him. I'm not comparing his body to something more perfect. He's already let go of it for that, but it clings anyway, it wants to follow and I want to drag it with him."

"That sounds somewhat particular, but not unfindable for someone of your resourcefulness, nor do I believe you'd never have seen it before."

I don't use my resources for that - but I could, if the alternative was [taboo] - but that wasn't, isn't my mistake. "When I was a kid, I spent a lot of time imagining being old. Everything else made sense to me. There was a butler I would steal books from, he'd sleep with his eyes open and I'd always wonder if he was just pretending."

"Was this a crush?"

"No, although it probably shaped what those could look like. There was a way I imagined he looked at things... Like I was saying before about how I split everything into frames, instead everything blurs together, like through a fine frost. But you can still see really beautiful precise geometries through it, like crystals of light. It's probably not a way anyone really sees things, it's not how time really works, you have to sort of look at it sideways. But when





I'm with him I feel like that's what he's doing, and I'm trying to look -"

"All this encoded in one feeling. A solipsistic pleasure." Tserghan laughed drily. Braz was about to protest as the train went into a tunnel. Sweeping darkness and churning noise momentarily cut her off, as the amber incandescent light that snapped on in the dark on its magic circuit sent golden crescent blades swinging around Tserghan's smile.

Marzanna closed the call and sat in her chair for almost an hour, feeling vaguely ashamed of herself. There was nothing here except for her to link this guy to a reliable psychologist, an actual Specialist in... well the thing is it was hard to tell where to specialize, he seemed to have every problem at once. But that was its own area of specialization. The Complex Comorbidities Clinic at Romarosa would be able to sort it out. He certainly didn't have any trouble explaining himself, once he let himself trust you the way he did his audience online, even though like online it didn't really feel like he was talking to you, like he had filtered you all the way out.

If she tracked down the institutions he'd been through - she'd managed to get him to cough up one name, the psychologist with him through high school, who'd taken





# Down by the River to Pray

by: [Amara Reyes](#)

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY

Name: Minak

Birthday: Unrecorded; presumably summer 2655

Sex: Blue

Occupation: Ward

Blood Type: 02-K

Likes: Carpentry, tanning, chemistry, glass-work, orchardry, basil, sugarcane, tapioca, human literature, bowering season (very rare for a Quay citizen), endurance flying sport, rooms-tales, and summer.

Dislikes: Intoxication of any kind, sleeping, metalwork, eir birthplace, swimming, operating in unweight (when it isn't the heights of open sky), strict schedules, work where teamwork isn't optional.

Seen with: Emelry, the outer edges of Kali's circle, and a ridiculous amount of random acquaintances

A young but definitively adult bird who hasn't quite found eir place in the city they love. A fervent but rather distant admirer of Kali, has only recently begun to make inroads in the grave court, which is eir newest focus after a short but full lifetime of hopping from apprenticeship to apprenticeship.



character profile





Passionate but noncommittal, a born jack of all trades always convinced that eir current interest is eir final. Widely known in the city of Quay, if for nothing else how widely e travels it. In everybody's business as if it's perfectly natural, no nosiness at all, simple this urge to always be on the first page of things, show up first, be involved - but e never seems to stick around. Most recently, having caught news of the upcoming audit, has been almost recklessly determined to be a part of first contact, and has spent half their adult life preparing for it. Emelry is someone who e has been waiting for a very long time, and e is particularly clingy towards and eager to impress her. Despite eir outward frivolity, is deeply committed to the project of the city and one of Kali's truest believers - much of eir exploration and flitting from job to job has been an intentional effort to cultivate as many skills as e can that, in this era, are still unique to the city among all tengmunnin.



## *Synopsis*


an emissary vessel from the See of Delphi, learned lawyers and messengers of the Sun, descend to the garden habitat of Savannah to uncover the nature of a mysterious project that might change the very key of the song of humanity.



## *Last Time*

staking their position between the factions running Savannah and the entrenched positions of the Ecumene, Emelry pulls on an overlooked connection and crosses a risky threshold






CW: Christian imagery, religion, meat consumption, death, war negotiation, morphological freedom debate, genocide threat

“When you asked yourself, ‘Where is it, where have I been left? Am I abandoned to a home poor and strange, my tongue again cut? Where is the path that has led to me, I, parentless and now masterless, I with no hand above my head, no hearth that has welcomed me! Where is my lineage of war, where are the rushing plains for me, born opposite Eden and yet drowned in its denied remembrance. O walls of Akkad, gardens of Babel, heart of my World! How shall you comfort me, so far from your warm shadow that I am!’ Who could bear this line, Christ Circumnavigator, but you who knows that strain, who knows where must fall the strikes, and how heavy, for a world to be remade? I call you, bridge of Bloods, first among servants and final

Don't  
bite  
I  
know  
to  
pen


**RECORD VI**

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of all slaves. Ash-eater, by the copse of your black ribs I call. Pray for us, we distant children who have come supplicant upon the sustained flower of your Ecumene - the great work of your hands. Lord Sofia, mind of the living God, pray for us.”

Emelry Sainshand - Hearing of Savannah, opening prayer




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## Record VII

In the city Quay and the seat of the king

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I always knew what God was to me. Always, even before the age of decisions, in such clarity that He may well have been standing before me. Anahit, she held that God was love. But when she said love, what she meant was eating and drinking. That shared familial mundanity of life. Small and precious sustaining joys. This was one level. Bettany also used the word love, but what she meant was justice. A work, a project, the most burning facets of her morality. Orthodoxy holds that God is best understood as light, the divine and living flesh of the sun. But light as





a word carries little meaning; it forms a signifier that can live anywhere.

In my heart God is truth. The status of reality, the pattern that justifies itself. Formed of a grand narrative which writes itself into itself a thousand times, a cascade from atom to soul, a spiral. The story of our tellurian plane is completed within its own beginning, already nested in that origin. God is a language of proofs that unites the highest fervors of the spirit to the most intimate molecular details, with no romance there save for awe at the craft. Resign yourself to the span of your perfect fate, the line of tale that your life falls, like an old crane arm, down into the furrow of - that is where God will wait.

Who am I to decide what truth is? No one can. But with each breath we can expose something, fractionally dispel a certain gauze of obfuscating mist, and leave that same-song behind. The project of faith is that spiral process internalized, the ability to know your own perspective and hold to it, to tell how it was made manifest for you alone. I lay floating on my back, staring up at the silver line of this new, poor sun: clack clack clack.





On that dark night when I saw the city from above, I had thought the city walled. Kali had pointed out the long dark shape wrapped crudely around the lights of the water and land, and thus I imagined the place as fortified. But weight or no, what use would birds have for walls? And that black line ran through the city rather than around it, it split the lights and did not contain them. The wall that was not a wall, a great dam of well-cut concrete bricks, held the river so as to create the eponymous quay.

The city was bramble and boulevard, wild tangles and plotted lines. A rumble lowed from the five great locks as even this early in the morning carts and cargo crossed between the halves of the city along the paved top of the dam - other, proper bridges spanned the river, but this was the indisputable center. Under those heavy slow falls, great machines turned with the sheer volume of the water, leaching the river's momentum produced by the veins of the habitat. Far beneath us was a vaster river, pulling an ocean's worth of runwater back to the waterfall of Fisher Valley, which continued to run miles and miles down to this very dam surface to turn its whistling wheels.

I woke in the river slowly. Even this far downstream from the dam, there was a faint thrum in the shallow currents. It





was good. Warm water and slick; unexpectedly warm were the shallow quays of Quay. A little glinting fish darted past my goggles, skimming through the green murk, and then another three.

We nested on the outskirts, by the fishing berns. Like a necklace, wickerwork and nets fanned out from the locks to catch the disoriented fish flopping from the falls - downriver, where the water narrowed and ran fast again. Further downstream, a rocky little rapids where the herons nested, clacking and tall, tossing up frogs to catch in their scissor-mouths. Upstream, the paint of the walls and rising cathedrals of twisted trees poking just above the parapets of the dam complex.

A red crow crowned in crystalline light, flying across the land and bleeding storms of blue and black onto the hills. A city rising from tiger lilies and camphor trees. Herons flying. Giraffes, like a forest of letters, walking beneath them. In the murals of the dam, the skyland of Savannah was always stylized as the same interlocking pattern of red and green and yellow squares, more minute in detail than anything else drawn.

But then I was properly awake. The river was shallow and still, I could easy walk buoyed by the thick water. Mud





seeped between my toes; I could grab footfulls of it and kick until it dissolved, leaving only the gritty scraps of roots pushing through the growing kelp. Drowning in life.

Walk, walk, with spread wings, pushing, paddling. Slow. The first few nights here, how difficult it had been after those clean bathhouse sleeping tanks - the sucking mud, clinging tendrils, all my instincts of movement could not tolerate it. But immersed, for a while, it wasn't too different. Nothing would catch me. There was the same unweighted cut through the air, the perfect kicks, I acclimated so quickly I was beginning to dread leaving the water every morning.

How was this torrid water so alive, how was it so clean? I could taste the green soil in each fleck of upstream bark and clay that clung to my skin. Ilian water is hard and clear, a cutting kind of clean, but the river of Quay was a clean that sloughed. A clean that made blood feel clean in turn.

The weight hit me all at once, hauling myself onto my litter where it was anchored. I ripped off my breathing aids and gasped in the cold sun, ribcage taut and already ragged. Nights were not so cold, temperature fluctuated little between day and night, and a warm loose mist trailed up





from the waters - but I was wet enough that drying and dressing made me ache with chill. The wind was odd and tentative, long slow pulls and utter stillness. Gusts of warm air periodically coughed upwards to the haze around the spine, and cold ones fell like stones and spread. Wind in the wall paintings: portrayed as white straw poured from earthen jars. Heavy air, again so Ilian, how the distant cap-wall of the habitat we had flown from loomed so similarly to the relatively miniscule geofronts that seemed so vast at home.

Rain Flower was sleeping in the stilt houses, and I in the water nearby, and both of us together at the edges of the city. Harka visited to wake me most mornings, perched on my litter's rail, with Minak often accompanying em, but just as often being chased off. Today both seemed to be busy - I could hear it.

“How even the stairs? Don't fall, tall son!”, “Look up, the arc, does it fit?”, “That door shaking. See the rattle? No, stand there, other step, that one.”, “Shaking you, blind boss! It's rustic type unsanded!” I heard the chattering even before seeing Rain Flower's face as he made his way down the stairs, so obscured by the whirling wings as he was.



“La, lady of the lake!” Rain came to the foot of the stairs, still holding onto the railing like a cane. The flock around him - Minak, a few young curious gawkers, and three white-vested carpenters’ guildsbirds, settled all around him and paused to watch me. “I have been humoring them all morning. Finally you join us.” Minak admonished him for that, pecking at his neck; he laughed warmly through the flinch.

I waved, “Hello. You are heading out?”

“No! We have plans already. I was coming to throw rocks at your litter, see if you drowned. Now come! They brought breakfast.”

~~~~~

“Waking! Up you are, my Emelry, my friend! Today is new. Today is kiln district! So much more I’ll show!” Minak chirped, perched on the windowsill. I wasn’t sure how to read the building - doubly unfamiliar for being a weighted dwelling, and for being built to human scale without human input. The ceiling was tall enough for Rain, but only barely; he stood with arms resting casually against the beams over his head. “Kiln district, carry you, warm of the city. Work and work! Now, is this house well wide?”





Minak had clawed her way into the welcoming process as soon as we had landed in the city. E was overflowing with excitement, insisting on the prestige and responsibility e had won on that first night, when e like a madman had slammed against my window. Every time I saw eir dance through the air I wanted to laugh - the memory of what fear had gripped me the first time I'd heard eir voice, how sharp and rocky it had once sounded. Now it was the warm crackle of a fire, the sparkling of ricocheting marbles - so the more e had pushed these past few days, the more endeared I became. Such a young thing. On the smaller side, as all blues were, and even smaller than that for being so young. E was all panic behind those shimmering feathers, all joy in those wide eyes, a beak fast and urgent.

“Wide enough,” Rain answered em, taking another spoonful of his green broth. Duckweed and dandelion, had he been instructing them to make something nostalgic for him, or had they done research? No such spoiling for me - the spread was bread, pastries, berries, butter, heaps of herb-spiced jerky so hard it had a tinge of grey to it where the white fat shimmered. This last was my favorite. “Easy to sleep and sit here, at least. It’s nice here - but you guys really built all of this for us? A bit too spoiled for choice, tomorrow night I’ll sleep in the red one, further from the



river so you don't wake our wet inquisitor up again. Emel-ry, throw me one of those wheat rolls?"

I did, aiming at his face. "I like it," Minak said, amused, "right seeming glad you stay. Well, what to do with it? Gulf of bodies - human pictures of life, oh I could swoop in, I could perch on this, on that, on that window, this giant bedding! Study, I could come in, kaka! You would always come, there would always be the need of craft and bed. So the carpented place for you and all."

"One size fit all," a fellow tengmu intoned - Gelo, a big old roan, through whose beak carvings the other side of the room was visible. The holes created a strange whistling voice, which eir fellow carpenters shared. The other group was Minak's, accompanied always by a flock of noisy young blues - presumably they were peers and friends e was showing off to, eir showman's temperament, though they shied hard from speaking directly to us. Gelo was quieter, and eir group quieter still, but none of them were shy. The air was full with the wingbeats of reckless birds, but Gelo hung back on eir chosen perch. "You'll by my shop: showroom. I've a craft of yours. Places to be filled. When Savannah fills."





“Hm.” More jerky. Minak flapped over and snatched some from my plate, I idly scratched the space on eir back, between the corackles, where the wings stemmed from. “You’re a carpenter - white vest, and I smell sawdust on you. Those piercings, are they related to work?” I asked.

“Good head,” Gelo nodded, clacking eir ornate beak. Little spikes and grooves and screw-holders organized by size had been cut into it, a utility belt which eir henna markings mirrored the pattern of. “Holding nail and file. I’ll show you. This grove is mine. Minak, heard, apprenticed to ours once? Twice, was? For days, kaka, then e to sparkle out.”

Minak laughed back at that, a high-pitched “Kaaa, yes of yes, timed frugal we are, and ran wide! I wanted to see shape under you. Landing place. And so saw, friend, study the outlines.”

“A whole human village waiting here, hm.” I gazed out the window Minak had occupied, where stood a row of similar shacks to this one. Exactly made, but rather experimentally proportioned, a little villa’s worth of them with an amusing lack of gardens or paths. A few early morning maintenance crews flitted from roof to roof in the dis-



tance, taking notes and testing shingles. “When did you start building?”

“Before Umihotaru. When high rooms saw the audit coming. Some practice. If this, if more. It is,” Gelo said, airy, whistling, grand, “show faith of meetings. No? Faith of friends enough to rest and sleep. This is my death pride.”

How warm and calm the day was. The light inside was strong, strong like true sunlight, from the golden-dyed slats of glass worked into the roof. It occurred to me, we spoke in a reversed lantern. It occurred to me: “death pride”. One achievable dream. The gem in your eye. A fractured socket.

“Minak, I’ve eaten enough, and you silly crowd before me. I’ll take the jerky - let’s be off. An audience with the king at evening - let’s brisk through the day before then. Shall we?” I was already hoisting my litter up and out the door, and they followed me - even Rain, pouting over another three wheat rolls he carried.





Harka hit us when we were passing the gates of the dam into the city proper - hit indeed, the same heavy impact that swayed my litter every time e landed on it. "Gathered procession, girl. Kiln district, heard today? Waker."

Rain was charming but tiring. I expected only certain things from him, and atimes I doubted if there was much to speak of with him that was not marveling and coordination. His attitude was a welcome counterpart to that which my own mission required, but still he had the space and luxury to play with this expedition more than I, and that made a gulf that was sometimes hard-bridges. Minak, Minak was bright and brilliant, and already felt indispensable. E had the respect of my first meeting forever. I could feel the loyalty, the pride and the need beaming from him - but e was fast and scrappy, far more so than my pace.

And Kali was a high, high wall.

Harka, then, undoubtedly was the person here I could be most at ease with, whose eyes I could be most assured of. I relaxed into my cushions, comforted by eir weight so close.

"Yes, I think. I've seen not enough, but much of the inner city, at least down the roads glancing. Procession - soon to turn again to parade! Rain is more a marshal than I, and





has seen more time in the city than I dare yet attempt. Tell me true, is the spectacle too much? With so many eyes on us I feel as if I'm dissecting the place grove by grove."

And indeed Minak's crowd of fellows was already being added to - I heard dam attendants quickly signing off work when they saw us coming, curious heads peeking out from every other weave of branches. Harka chuckled at watching them. "No, no, no wrong if mutual. Stare, stare. It's good, good the influence, good the contact. No one dares call these you two some rising lord, nor other the wardens of the rooms. Walk light, look back and back in light - sparkle in four eyes! It's good. It's good, everyone see."

"If you say so... I'll bear it, public office and all, only stay by me? And, shall Kali come, one of these days? I'd prepare. Has e much occasion to walk like this, among the roads, see-bee-seen in the same way?"

"No, no. Maybe," e ruffled. "Asking, then. But thinking content, part of eir structure to be in the grave tree high. To be hearth, I think e thinks, to be a place over person. The king sign? Maybe only see in high context, city center, look, a holy ground. And, too busy, old scholar! Eating study more than ever, ka, yes. E has eir eyes and heirs, king needs no body."





“Do you approve? Sounds lonely.”

“There’s a loss, aye. But e prefers - who am I? Path and process, perspective. Judge: but, I see it not away from the world, but in eir own, own world above all others, sky palace saved.”

“Still. A bit of shopping, someday...” I said, half-smiling. Harka ruffled eir feathers again, settling in next to me.

Snaking through the city. Canyon trees. No wide boulevards, it was like passing through a thicket always conveniently cleared before us. Ropeways laid thick and messy between the sides of each passage, a whole spiderweb of pulley transfers overlaying the city. The streets were built small and spare, almost like rail tracks, wood-paved grooves for carts to pass by - and, necessarily based out of my litter, we effectively moved as a cart.

Our itinerary was such: in through the dam, into the fishery processing centers. Ground glittering with shucked scales - the fatty smell of freshwater catch - hooks and drying racks and the wet denim-vest uniforms of the workers. This place bordered the true butcheries, near one of the airdrop landing fields and the depot of the city’s carts, which together formed the city’s widest plaza. Beat-



en-down yellow sandy earth and a few spots of concrete pavement. The main food market - God, lively tengmu chatter was overwhelming, the shouts and caws literally from a hundred different directions, like the center of an Ilian marketplace. Behind us were the lumberyards and carpentry holds - Minak shied us away from them and saw Gelo off, as we made over to the other half of the city's industrial districts.

Across the river were the residencies, the schools and libraries. There was something of an even split, our side of the river industrious clusters around the airdrop plaza; the other scholastic and organized around the beehive tower of the grave tree. My past few days' travels had remained among this buzz of work and rarely crossed the river, so the kiln district was now left as the last place to explore on this side.

"By the way -" in a moment when the others were busy, Rain bent slightly to the level of my ear - "called home yet, runaway?"

"Pft, haha. The blackout is maintained. The only things I want to hear or know from them now are the ones that would make themselves heard all the way down here. I'll





not return until my time, or until the sun goes out. But have you? Keeping watch on things, oh deserter?"

"No! No, perish the thought," he said in mock-offense, smiling through his feigned shock. "I'll wait for you. I really should keep playing hostage, I think, poor retainer captured by this cruel seeker! You only like me for my tools, all that."

"Good, keeps our options open. If you ever have the urge of sneaking back, tell me. We'll stage an escape, all things we will do when we need to."

"How long will it take, do you think? To get everything you're looking for?"

We were interrupted by Minak landing on my head, claws scabbling into my scalp - I think e expected to find more purchase in my sparse hair. I yelped somewhere between a wince and a laugh, but Harka took it as pain - "Minak! Nosy!"

"It's alright!" I called back, holding back another laugh. "E's just telling me where we are."





The plumes of smoke rising from kiln district - first the clay kilns, then the smelteries, then further to the glass-works.



The treeline stopped suddenly. A stark thoroughfare's width separated kiln district from the wider district, and no wonder - it was a firebreak. Even past it, all the trunks and vines to a certain height were painted over in a thick, suppressive white, with common stretches of it tinted gray by rising plumes of smoke. In the center of the first clearing-plaza, a flock of busy and humbly-dressed roans pecked over an overturned cart, pulling supplies from it and attaching parcels to different threads of the ropeways.

How in the world were they producing habitat-grade glass from such simple workshops? The body of the cart was curved like a boat's prow, and its wheels sparkled in the light. Glass wheels, dense and heavy and perfect, so translucent that they were almost invisible. Savannah had no windows - habitat glass in even this quantity was incredible. Yet whenever a righted cart passed, it seemed to be sailing over the ground on a few circles of shadowless sparkle.





The road we travelled by was the tread of freight carts, not the traffic of people, so at our level were loading docks, storage holds, and the hot blasts of the workshops themselves. Ropeway elevators were all that connected the ground to the upper level of properly kept shops, so it seemed as if we walked through a long low contiguous factory. We hurried through the clay kilns, mostly shuttered and unoccupied for the long daily cooks, and hurried faster through the fouler smeltery airs that Minak and Harka minded much less. But where the trees grew thicker, and the upper branches were hung with little flashes of shadowless color - the same window-glass as the wheels - we came to where Minak had brought us.

“Deep enough!” Minak chirped.

Harka grumbled back at em, “So this the play day, you came for toys our guests? What?”

“My guests! And lanterns at lantern city! Here, I stop you here,” e said imperiously, “to show a treasure.”

Here it was a glass shop, the bottom layer a simple dye-kiln housed in a tunnel of arced branches. Two workers were mixing sands before a rumbling kiln-furnace, lit by molten light and dragging stirring-brooms through the heaped up



shining piles of sand. They hopped their way further into the room to turn and face us, but did no more than glance over. A young shopkeep was the one who flew down from the upper level to us.

How did e even stay in the air? Two little wooden boxes were affixed to each of their wings, and balancing carefully in a sort of controlled fall, they landed to speak with Minak. The shopkeeper looked at us sidelong in eir ornate, tasseled red vest, speaking to Minak. E had been anticipating our arrival. Our passage had been quiet but uneventful, stares and no gawking, but there was a palpable sense of quiet even as work went undisturbed all around us.

E opened one of eir boxes and thrust the opening at us - inside was a little pale star, a clawlike arrangement of glass, striated like a citrus juicer. Little slats in the wood provided just enough light and shadow to make the piece sparkle.

“A little key,” the shopkeep said, “a way of words. Yours? Or new color.”

Rain took it - a blue one, a pale periwinkle blue. “What is this? Jewelry? Ah, it’s one of those eye rocks. Today’s a bad one, then...”





“No, no,” Minak chirped, “see, no spirit, no still here - it’s a pure maths. Run down the angles - so perfect! La, what could be there? This joining, this ridge, have ever seen such out in of the world? No, never, but aye within. These are lines your plan runs into! When you say, ‘I fly here, I do this, I will conduct,’ your circuit looks such. That clean gleam. How to hold it?”

“Ha.” I took it back from Rain, holding its little shrine-lantern enclosure in my hands. “Alright, I see. An abstraction made physical - are we bringing this to the hutches?”

Minak nodded, cheered that I had understood. “Tool and goodwill on the way.”

Harka hopped closer to us with a broad flutter, “What? Today to hutches? Salty Mukon, that one? Plain errands, you said!” Minak barked at this, laughing.

I motioned to settle them both. “Only for a little while. But Minak and I discussed, I’d like to see. It will be the hardest part of tengmunnin life for me to relate to, Harka, the hardest thing to truly translate when the account is given. You’ll be coming?” I held one up, the reddish one, to the spinelight and let the shine play among its ridges. So dark and yet so clear, with a heavy density that confirmed it as







2'  
LUCIG121  
AET  
FVCS2  
VCCSM20W  
WPECENV2  
RUCENRV  
LUMODO  
A 202  
EVAIDV  
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23E  
202FEND1  
1120W  
0N12  
VTIDVV  
WVWV  
DOTOE  
E1  
FVBORE  
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IWCID1D0  
LELOR  
E102W0D  
2EL DO  
WE E711  
VDT12C1  
10W  
COM2EC1E  
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211  
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FVWCH

window-class glass. Dropped from the spine to the mountains, I knew it wouldn't break.

Harka hesitated, but nodded, and deferred. The keeper left us with eir load after a whispered negotiation with Minak and flew back up to the rich wood planks of the main front. Two pale blues, a gold, and my deep, ruddy red-brown, which I continued staring through as we began to move again. High above along the spine I saw black shapes moving through the glass - a short procession of barges, rolling in back to the cap far behind us.

Habitat glass. Were they really made in these kilns, some small-batch, specialized process right on the street? Was it dug up from an old, hoarded personal supply of Sever's? Hewn from the spine itself and recolored? None of these possibilities seemed likely. The glass of my room when I slept there, that was plain glass, strong enough to stop a janitor crash perhaps, but it would still shatter at something less than cylindrical torsion.

Rain and Minak played with the deeper of the two blue glasses. Minak would catch it expertly in eir beak, batting it off the flat of eir wings like it was a ball game, and test Rain's long arms by pitching it back further and further afield. Through the rest of kiln district, and a few more





souvenirs. A clay bowl with a red crow painted spiraling around its basin. A scale-weight, borrowed from another more dour shopkeeper's measuring table. What was currency here? It seemed a system patterned off corporate allocation-scrip, with favor mixed in - what would Kali say?

I slotted that into my growing list of matters to bring to em. My tower of questions piled yet higher for every mile of the city I saw. What was to be done? What could I do here without a team of researchers at my disposal, an outpost and a proper delegation? I was tracing through this place at the width of a pheromone trail, even the aid of my full crew would be poor compensation. And for my first and most precious question, even Harka would not be with me.

Out from the city, out from the refuse-roads by which all the slag of kiln district made its way back to the airfield. Out to where the trees grew wild, grey only with ash and no underlying white. The entwined wicker of their branches was abandoned, growing unkempt, scraggly and straight. The leaves grew greener, flushed thicker and darker.

Harka alighted back onto the rail of my litter with that characteristic thump. "City grown too newly, here. In some



years, bend back these greens and seep my city. Now my molded limit. I'll back. Far, for old steward I."

"Big old frog," Rain laughed. "What, you've already come so far! I'm tripping over roots here, stay with us."

"No. Not mine," e said, a grain of crackly discontent in eir throat. I would have called it nervousness. E hunched eir wings, ruffled. "You'll feast? Find march to the city? Bad draw, kaka, to tour on the day. Back to calling."

"Of course we'll be there. It's what the lieutenant's come for," Rain said.

"Not yours? Not yours?" Minak pressed, less animated, sticking eir neck out boldly at Harka. "Not yours a look and laugh?"

Harka chuffed, a deep sort of mid-throat click. "It's good, Minak light. Work and weary. I can't carry it."

Minak begrudgingly accepted eir departure with a bow. Harka lifted in a strong heaving thrust and was away, leaving us in the sweep of eir wing-air. Minak perked up once the older crow had flown, hopped up from where e had apparently been walking, on the ground, to perch on






branches and glide from one to one across the lane. E animated, "Secret secret boil. What is lost, my! Scrip. There's a shame with it all, no, the mess of albumin?"

Rain laughed, "What?"

"Saying we," Minak mumbled, "here it is, so far from city-wall. Why not by hearths, living in hand? A nymph can fly in, dance in watch of word, save scent on wind before. So away and clean and picked city bloodless and nice, starting shot, not for some. High Harka - I understand."



We'd crossed the length of the city, now. Downstream from the dam, where we had slept, was on the outskirts - and here was their opposite end. We were far enough from the river that even the omnipresent sound of its rush diffused into the bordering wetlands, from which were drawn the still-plentiful clay and sand. How young! For a settlement to still live so closely to its livelihood, the resources not yet carved out. So there was a rolling marsh nearby, and a rough wood we made our ways to, a path snaking through it worn by cart wheels but still grassy. The air was thick, blown in moist through the trees.

The bramble of the outskirts lessened to new house-tree shoots, waiting unbound to be tended in years, and even



the soil was different. Pale and muddled, and the sound of frogs. The hutches were further still. With no sight of them, we had been walking twenty minutes when a young crow jingled out of the air like a missile.

“Ka!” A mad whistle I only heard half of, Minak hyperactively beating eir wings to go reach the newcomer. “Is that you? What is your name!” E lifted eagerly, wheeling to see the arrival, who breezed past em and landed with a soft kite’s flutter on a branch above us, a small bell tied to each wing-wrist

A thin thing, knife-thin and wide-eyed, with a composed and curious face. E spoke softly, deliberately. “Soli. Woke up and the gates were broken. Haven’t left, Minak, who called down. My era?” The new one nudged the air at us.

E was shaking excited, couldn’t keep eir wings still. “How long, how long! Came friends, this! Soli of the bells... when I for you came up, Lieutenant, Soli was in nymph. What! Fathom-head, no place in the city? What have you found?”

“Six days woken. Little jobs. Errands for Mukon. Still too loud,” e said, bending eir head to scratch at eir inner wing. E jumped from the branch, plummeting from the sky in





unmeasured freefall before stopping casually, stepping onto my litter's railing. Eir bells were silent.

This Soli stared at us, collecting every angle e could. "These. Ka! I am the first so young seen that body. A place for me. Big and small... Minak..."

"Bright one, dancer! Talking of these things. Fly! Bring us to my friend!"

Rain was shivering, and was right to - Soli was cute, adorable in the way that all young animals are, even birds with their scruffy gangliness. Eir plumage was molted roan already, adult feathers well on their way in, only a few patches of pure black still remaining. "I... I... what is the etiquette here? Hellooo..." he said, syrupy sweet, have you come to find us? We're heading out to the hatchery, nursery?"

"Minak told me, Mukon told me, tender. Yes. Furrow road. Minak found, driver, new words sticking. You stick, sensitive, clinger. Often now? Why?"

"H-how old are you?" Rain asked as Soli edged closer, suspiciously towards him along the railing as we walked. "It's... well, we're here to study, to become acquainted.



Have you seen much of the city? We've been all over half of it, but there's always more, there's... Emelry, I'm bad at this."

Soli answered, staring. "Six days speaking. Drawn empty work was pure in me. Flood, breaking, sickness, the flood-crumpled gate wall for you. Here for work and sickness, waterline up."

"What sickness lives here?" I posited. "What festers, I will make an account of. What flourishes, with it. What a struggle, to be born! But the work is drawing."

"Kind and warm, you tower," Soli snapped. "What pretty eye does call you? What will you cut? Right and true, there a noble tower, chant climb lily peace. Filed steel, do you know what you are doing to me? Sick and heavy already, me, drink dust with me. Nine Leaves and Sainshand. Call through the word 'basil', breaking."

Rain motioned to comfort em, "Soli, Soli, six days old and you know our names? We're not here to break anything... Six days, is that normal to talk like this so soon?"

"All there, all the heard things, brewing second egg and break!" Minak explained, strutting along the railing,





“Please. Break into clear, a storm, a field, is the song, big curve up. Windchill.”

Soli chirped, “And breaking, breaking surface tension. Some old story. Climb fine. Now come! To where I stay. Minak, brave, flew fast, from the end of song to the paint and cries. We are never at home: I, slower, faltered. A fear in me, your cliff. Tower.”

The hitches were another of Minak’s dalliances - could I call it that? Another job e had walked away from, but drank deeply of. E still visited often, e told me, this place that so many citizens shunned. Birds like em, like Soli, sometimes gathered back here, the few volunteers, for something unresolved. It was a snap, the border between nymph and adult, a mental bifurcation where sight turns to shape. One falls into wholeness in one moment, and what happens then?

In my childhood I felt so strained. So unmoored - especially in retrospect. Much of that is the plain regret of the process of time; what if I had known better, what if I had been told the answers I required but earlier, what if I had found things differently. What if I had been better, better able to chase myself and raise up others, knew to do more justice to the fragile and transient things I touched. But it







was not only that review. There was a very tangible sense of a disconnect between mind and mouth. Things I was unable to put to words and therefore unable to fully think.

Take this - one week on the train home with mother, I had dozed off and let my cheek rest on the window. I enjoyed the motion and sway of the half-lit town passing, the comfort of the dull car. "Please, I know you're feigning sleep" she said, and I could only blush and make a show of shaking awake. But yes, I had been pretending. Why? To linger in the fantasy of rest - to feel her gently shaking my shoulder - to provoke her sweet voice. Because I knew sleeping after a long wakefulness was something children did, and that I should run down the rail of that role a moment out of a sort of loyalty to the image. I knew all that, somewhere. But I could not tell it to myself - could not feel it at a certain level - had only the deep rumble of true thought, and the surface instinct of the body process. Childhood, for me, could be defined by those two realms being mutually untranslatable.

I could not figure out, deep within, why my body chose to move the way it did. And my body could not know which utter impulses drove it. But both halves were known, only stored in different places! So there was a frustration there,





similarly unnameable. The age I knew everything about myself but was unable to engage with that knowledge, unable to draw conclusions from it or make decisions by it. And what, now I was past it? In total communion with my mind and heart, master of my soul? Doubtful. Fickle girl, leaping at swords and shadows blind.

Rain noticed my face go sour. "What age," I asked him, before he could press, "did you really learn to talk? As in, connect your intention to the effect of your words, to mean rather than just say."

He laughed at that, surprised. "Emelry! I'm silver, I was always silver - I think I learned that before I even learned to read. That echo there is so obvious when people speak to you as a boy, watching and waiting. You learn quite quick to know what face to bring to which people - perhaps most boys fall into a trap there, thinking of it as a mask they inhabit within society. The trick is for it to be a shield. But here, God, six days and speaking like this? Knowing our names? How, how are you able to catch on so quick to what they're talking about?"

"Maybe something in it is similar to Ilian syntax? Sometimes, at least. Perhaps I dredged a sympathy from the



memories I was shown. I don't know. But it's straightforward when I listen."

We were closer.



The young forest halted into a clearing and the gnat clouds of the unmolested clay marshes sunk down into cracked earth. From the drier clays sprouted a vast field of fragrant basil filling the clearing entirely, stalks tall, vibrant, gleaming in the daylight. The soil solidified again where their dry roots tangled their way through it, and past where the hutches waited for us rose another forest. Birch, with golden-green leaves swaying high.

"Mukon!" Minak called out ahead. By response a few heads poked out from the basil field, dark nymphs alert at the noise and strange shapes approaching them, the bolder ones watching and the more timid fleeing back to their home.

And such a noisy home. Sharp-eared Rain Flower winced at the discord - human and tengmu speech, melodies sung by both, raw sounds bolted with the crackle of worn-down





speakers. And over that din, the even louder din of nymph squawking, squabbling, singing.

More carpentry, more stilts. The hutches were built in a sort of horseshoe of birchwood and playground-bright enrichment structures, and the noise rose from them even this far. Human speech, tengmu speech, music melodic and discordant playing from speakers, and nymph squawking and squabbling cutting through it all. Rain winced at the cacophany, and even as Minak flew ahead, Soli hung back shyly on my litter's rail.

“Know you king of crowns?” e asked, looking up at me.

“Who, Kali? Well, I’ve come to confer a course with em, and I call em my friend now. Such things have been built here; we will learn of them together.”

“Hi Kali, hi Kali. E sends stories, here, and tide daily. Never old aye.”

“The noise...”

“I’ve circled here,” e confided to me, “past days. Figure with me: fire-douse sound, hear-drunk I such. And now I know. Can I hear as I did? What school, where? City says





the taken, engulfed procedure speech, Kali's way, and we are new. You and I. To the story of city. We are as new."

"Mm. And late too, Soli. There's much time that's passed in this way of things. Do you approve, the way you came up? How close is the memory, can you plot through it?"

"I live there." E shook eir head off nervously. "Look, then, fine enough."

We were close enough to the birch buildings to see the screens. Each played a different program, a different di-agram; the din came from a mass deluge of information. One flipped through a page of a novel once every ten seconds, reams and reams of dense text - another played drone footage of distant Savannah landscape, perhaps even the same sweeping vistas used in the leadership's advertising materials? Another was the broadcast of an inner-system hardball tournament; another was a stock recording of a lunic hyperballad. Wide and indelicate, Soli said, in a way impossible to track each piece of at once. But maybe feasible to absorb, all at once.

Nymphs were everywhere - I had expected a nursery, but this was a playground. Through the slotted birch windows, almost recalling wooden bars, I saw play out a labyrinthine





nest complex of straw and quilt blankets, puzzle-boxes and bookshelves, a warren of climbing ranges and food stores. Intricately built, nymphs moving through the place like bees in a hive, but with no supervision. Shunned even by its attendants.

Groups of them squabbled within the structure, flew circles in flocks high above, sat patiently in the sea of noise. A hundred, two hundred here, more foraging in the deeper birch woods? But away from the arc of the main hutches there was another building, more closed-in and roofed in tile rather than thatch. “Not now the year, hatchery here,” Minak explained, nodding towards it. “Fine Mukon - e will not answer! But e will here, here without bower, ka!” E flapped around our heads, herding us closer and away from where the wary crowds of nymphs were taking more and more interest in us.

“Minak!” A raspy, high voice returned alongside a slammed-open shutter. Its bearer pushed through the window just as Minak looked up again, and they both flew up so eagerly they collided in the air, laughing and snapping at each other, playing in the air like two jousting moths.

“Mukon! Fellow! Deafened hereon? Silly, the arrived!”



“So soon?” the old roan chirped happily. “High news, what, through whole city for here, prying peeler! Led silly by a king.”

“I, I!” Minak said. “My quarry, mine to the heart, and I the fast arrow. This Emelry and Rain! Who it was I to called down. I.”

Until now, the crowd of nymphs had watched us cautiously and enraptured. Their heads of downy or gleaming black feathers poked from the hundred windows of the hutches as each stared quietly at us. But now all in the colorful courtyard had leapt to the roofs, to see us at eye-level, and a burst of song and cries rang out from them at once. They jumped their little dusty bodies into the air, swirling, daring each other closer and closer. Minak trilled harshly at them back, meeting a distinct chorus of ka-ka-ka laughter, but the mass of them settled again - closer, less cautious, curiuser.

There was a different color in their staring eyes. A different focus level, something that stared, and looked past, and yet still sparkled. I knew then why Harka, perhaps why many others felt such a barrier to this place - I saw it in their eyes. There was the distinct, unmistakable spark of soul - it was not a clever animal bluntness but rather a





kind of hyperactive association, a selfish drinking in of the whole world at once. Even as their maddened interest turned to us it was clear that it was not only towards us - but also how we moved through the air, how our shadows fell, the heave of the litter, the mannerisms of the two adults. A cacophony of chatter. And they moved as a flock, a true flock, not the organized murders of the adults which were careful to regiment themselves. There was a reflexive measured awareness of space rather than the true following. A school of fish, I laughed to myself muttering, as Rain laughed in true delight.

“Oh, I adore! Little one, little one, what are you called?” One had alighted on his finger and was actively gnawing on his wrist before shaking off and away, which we met with even greater charmed laughter. “They are so quick! Minak, is this play? Or are they only pestering us for food.”

“In, inside,” Mukon rumbled. “None.”



The smell of brewing chocolate and the steam of it in the air. Straw beds, greenhouse-warmth from the glass windows - golden again. Soft wood walls that muffled the outer din. This building was also built like where Rain







had stayed, large navigable rooms rather than the honey-combed series of cabinets and alcoves that was the carpenters' main work within the tended trees. It was wide, empty, meticulously clean. Polished. To a crow, this must have seemed a cathedral. The nursery proper was only a room away, left empty and idle. But I peeked in to see the nest-baskets, with blankets tidied and ready over the straw and down, underneat the dormant heat lamps. Mukon backed away from us as we entered, shuffling up to perch on the rim of the one nest-basket left in the central room.

E growled, a raspy voice like Minak's but deeper. "So? Bold Minak, wanderer blue? Man and woman, did you know, this student!"

"And still student!" Minak interrupted, annoyed, "Frail friend, who comes me here with? We're good. Say I'm workless!"

"But you won't stay. Runner. Send city here, when I leave up." Mukon turned up eir beak at Minak, and moved to look at me intently. Shifted eir gaze to Rain, doubly intently, and then back to me doubled again - like their whole body was a curious weathervane, leaning forward. "Neither of the rooms, you. Visitors. Great island and little islands. With no world?"





“No world?” Rain asked, a bit taken aback.

E motioned with eir wings, fanning the air “Not contiguous. World of islands, I mean. That’s right. Now see, this is a binding, this river old. Old river, this roan. In my way, in my way I hate it. I want to see them. No world.”

“Come to speak nymphs, Mukon,” Minak chirped.

“And what! Add my course entourage. Ka, silly Soli, speak there! Take that with wellness! Minak never, Soli over, my work! Ka! Get them! Bad city hates to bower. Allocation, what, ka! Talk talk here, and find what? Boggle-gaze, the players will hear in the pre-game, but what said back? No, speak to Soli closest, that’s the earned distance.”

Rain was still struggling to parse eir words, and Mukon talked quick - not helping. “We’re interrupting you, I get it. You’re in charge here? Is it a job you don’t want? What, no one helps you here at all, with the... the course, you said? We walked a long way here.”

“Aye, good and far. You can talk at wherever you want. But speak nypmhs, this... no, just I here, I and Minak and helpers. Charmed, no. Wary. Minak! Told your city story?”



“Ka! No, I will. Wait! Cargo, Emelry. In the high reds. Red land high. Where is your map, ka!”

A map! I still had the one I had pilfered from the doctor - it would be some use here. I motioned to Rain, who helped unload it from my litter.


“Mukon in the high whites, salt mountain. The furthest from line rivers.” Together they laid it on the table. Minak quickly skittered atop it, claws chipping the laminated paint they met. E motioned with eir beak at a little rumble of elevated pale cyan well within the red lines of the reserved third. “Here, up the castle. All come! All come to the canyons. And where was I.”

Mukon took a short jump, bit at the map and rotated it, throwing off Minak’s balance - e flapped back, startled, to the corner of the room again with a few mumbled chides. “Here,” Mukon nudged with the fuzzy top of eir head, at a blue-purple stretch very close to the border. “Marsh. Clay marsh, like Quay. Same herons and waddling things. Squabble place for the lone clay, knife crossroad. Rough and warm. Not built mine the tall places, the keen king eagle.”





I'd wondered, ever since the herons. Harka once said they recognize jays as relatives but not people. What would they think of Heath crows, so different and so inert, yet so on the threshold from spirit to soul? And eagles - what would it be like to see an eagle, alive alongside them? Vast beasts like proud and vibrant echoes of yourself, bladed, screaming. I smiled to myself - was it like how I saw solars? Humans have always borne, since even before the garden, a kind of morphological privilege - so little in the world is like us, in shape and niche. A separate lineage, ours was as an ostrich, a penguin, we had become different.



Mukon nodded low, tracing the blob of cyan on the map. "I was born in salts. Listen: anymph I was a lord. I, the master hunter! I was the voice of life and death. Anymph the game of talons played me, the game 'toss' and 'cut'. I skinned snakes, singing, I, I, eye-king, blood eater, storm shape. It was a shape game. I saw shapes scour and flee, I scoured and fed. On the sharp white, the flat plains, I smashed and cut and ate so rich on that salt. My flock was thin and scattered - I scared them off to perch! Each of us world-sovereign, each, galavant.

"I woke. Others far to the hump of the curve, blind. I woke alone, and said, I tricked it out of the world! I stole my



owed mastery! And no tongue, no for me heart of garden tower. Only the sad songs we all had, barked border, scab! And I rising. Look the shape I, dazzled, had pulled from the world, I, who had alone fallen claw up. This my world, my salt my blood, the greatest conceived height. Poverty. Specks here, they talk, they crowd, good, and when waking they will speak blank, be born in speech. When did speech come to me?

“How would it feel, in humans, before the chosen era? To look up at hidden stars, a green, a red you see, a note, jealousy? Firstborn, secondborn. It was lonely. They say song: the lack of speech, and it was lonely. Say song, cry. Poverty. Walking in poverty, low and heavy, with the scrapping tools of claw. I the master hunter, weeping. How would it be? To live in the silent-shell? To dig with your hands? Break your pretty nails on roots, and no poem for the pain. Tied, tied the neck to the tree, to... to conifer, no poetry, do you see? The love of no poetry, burnt love and no words. To fly, to... turn. To walk in the dark. To have no name. To be guided by only what is inside you, your mind, your heart, not polished, not polished to soul, not polished to the story-beast hearts. Insufficient. It is so, so long, it is so long, to live cut down, to live with no words, to scabble, to bite. No pain.





But a body made fear-flesh, dream-eye. What could you walk to? No walls, curving..."

Minak butted in, "It was me, Minak. Minak raised as a child. You hear of the song land. You hear of this red land, or the thorn land, of what you see the songs! Salt salt and salt, see through. Rash and rash, web and web, the taste inside your claw..." e intoned in a sort of meter - Rain looked at me, hopelessly confused. "No weight for me. Whirlwind eye. One way. I, no achievement, watched and shown, thrust in my face. The proud marshes of the third, promised in the room called legends. One song-movement of the high rooms carried me. We sang the story, moved with it. Children made, no molting, I was bound and shield. Given a shape, a flock-shape, a way of running. And old bowagers told us the running, the firing way, little clay, piles. Built granaries, that is what we could do, and pride for that, burning, ludicrous pride! That we ate safe. House and no law. A replicated pattern, and no city. In those parents, like Mukon, was a hope, a partial hope, they social, e alone. May we could climb heaven! May we could eat always! Simple good things calling in song. But city different burns. A scar scab on land. Only a city could dream for a garden, only there could see a tower. Garden, not land. Tower, not brick. That is all majesty sight."



“Suffer you live this way?” Mukon asked. “Live sovereign solate, a little span perfected? Real gentle way. Still soul, life in clay, still. One million years, who could say no? Still true when shining, dazzling, soaring, drunk. Broken down: tide, talk, work, what good in new sight, muddied crowd, dependent, fearful, world so vast now it belongs vast, not your only eye? But a dream beyond! A new thing! One million years away, found now! A surrender to something, outer skin. I say I want it, need it, the pull from pit heart. I want a king. Not me. A voice for above my own, friends and fields. Nymphs eat, not learn, they digest and drink and burn, burn perfect, pierce through fog and dead night. But no lantern. No beacon, so star, wisp will. So my selection to spread, panorama of the voice I heard awoken. So what wakes here, liar priest? What demanded right rises?”

“How will the audit run?” Minak pressed, Mukon nodding along. “Where the confrontation, the speakings? I wanted your speaker. I wanted everyone. Laugh the sky down, is there a right? A parallel? Maybe, maybe the tread of the rooms, the welcome, the... the holding, holding it up! Where is my mirror? Where is the body I will see and shout yes, mine, mine!”





Mukon continued for me. “How will it go, how will it go, at the end? What life will be allowed?”

All three looked to me, Rain wearing his “I’ll let you talk” look of deference. That admirable sidestepper. He could be anywhere and choose not to belong to it, stay safe as an order-taking citizen.

I steadied myself. “There will not be an end. This is a work, too, and it must be mine and yours. What there is to grapple with is the fact of summoning, how quick you flew to land at Savannah. Humans are comfortable being one of many peoples, that is an old and completed fight, safe in the records. The question is the speed of history. Looking towards the grave tree, how are we to move in that shadow? That is what is new. An ancient thing, appearing ragged in a flash from the clouds. Months must decide what has lasted centuries before - no long march for us, only lightning. That will be the problem, how to hold that completely.”

Mukon was overexcited. E had listened with increasing hunger, and now with shivering wings. “Summoned,” e said, settling on the word. “You know, you know? That I was with my God when the waters were split? That my heart too was in the dawn of the word? That I flew west from Gate One? That I sat down at South Peace? That I saw





the walls and trenches, that I was carried a fledgeling in the high hands. You see it?"

"Mukon. It can be no other way - you who were the wings and wheel-flesh! None could deny it, none could dare, none could dare step against that heart. You were there, gleaming note of the crown. You were there, above olive and fig and pomegranate, in the smoke of the flame. None can gouge that eye. Fearful men will say, 'you came from afar,' and that be the height of the slander, for it is wrong. But none can say, 'you should not be here'."

"Why fearful?" Minak asked, quizzical, and I felt like I was falling. Like my knees had been shot, right then left. "What are you doing?"

"I share your city, now." The map was spinning for me. It was all so clear. I could see to the end. "I swear to die here."



"That was quite the talk to have with nursery keepers."

"Mm."





He looked sidelong at me, continuing to walk slow. “You’re going to talk like that with everyone?”

“Oh, yes. As earnest as I can be.”

“You can’t take this the wrong way. But I thought... look, not my job, but you’re being intense.”

“Ka!” I laughed, eyes on the path back. “Have I ever been another way?”

He gave me a look that I knew was a suppressed roll of the eyes. “You still haven’t come with me to the Likin shows like you said you would. You haven’t eaten with me at the chocolate house by the library. You’re going to be missing things, if all you talk about are the high things and stabbing worldly currents.”

“Who but I?”

“Yeah, la, not my job I said. I know time is short, and I’m not, like, telling you to relax. But I don’t think you’ll be seeing everything.”

“Keep that view, Rain.” I was tired. “I do not ask you to be an auditor, you are not under my command. Explore the city as you like, talk to its people as you will - you must!



You are my comrade now. Your perspective is as vital as mine. All I can do is question my course, all I have are my demands. I cannot live among this place yet, only hew records. That's the task of my role."

"But you were just talking about understanding it, understanding the people..."

"Yes! But I do this from the perspective of a recorder, not a neighbor, not a fellow. Haruspices move away, must belong to all places they visit equally."

"And will you?"

"Will I what?"

"Will you even move away, Emelry? Where is there from here? I thought we were doing this because the rules couldn't apply anymore, they didn't fit. La, you aren't going back to your crew."

"Our course will be set! Eventually, things will be made clear. But until then..."

He sighed. "Whatever."





I had been right. I hadn't understood until I explained it all to Mukon. The See's faults were those common to all sovereigns, but in many ways they would be ready for what was to come. Why were the upper echelons of edicts being made? The frontier was still in expansion - the plans of several centuries would pass before the capability for further expansion would materialize - so why the stricture? Why the open forbiddance of leaving the well of the sun?

We were given example after example. A sky's worth of civilizational patterns, what weight to live beneath. From what I knew of the inner See, neighborly studies consumed them, occupied such bulk of theological research and theory. Which of the thousand roads was like us? Yes, we, they, had grappled hard with the question of people without humanity. All logics of stars. What could surprise us, what could scare us but the redirection of our own into something it cannot be? This is what Kuryo's criticism was blind to. The human was never the pure object of the See, only the shape we made in the water. The way of cutting that we are subject to. The story that will stem from our throats forever in its efforts to reach trueness and fullness, the same completion that all souls face towards. This was the close road, the one easy to see in time.



The issue of the arrow. The question of the project: not “what are we” but “what must the pace be?”. How must we live so that we may run, so that the ground and our foot-falls pace in unison? This was the law of limitation. The flaw of cults is that they want, that their ideologies need to jump to the end. Cults demand an immediate transformation into the perfect state. They reject the real world not for its nature but for the inexorable pace it moves at. The wheel always turns at the same pace, each asteroid in it at their own set speed. To Kuryo, to Cote, this is not a steady foundation. It becomes a cruel and bloody baggage. A window to break through, to the other side, and let the void pour in.

These things change. Who could change the seasons of Heath, that oldest cycle of the heart, that definition of our era’s natatory life? The engineers of Jade Belt, of course. And who could change the sunlight, the dispensary seat of Majesty? The high and holy eye that had presided over not just all history, but all life, all matter in the wheel. The See itself did, claiming for the first time our ancient birthright. And who could change the turning of the wheel? I, and my line, and all who build cities there, and take away the clay. Transformation is possible, inevitable, but it is at this pace. From Babylon to Ecumene, from





old union to new union, how much blood had been spilt, how many questions answered? How long did corn wait in the grasses before we drew it out, aflame and whole?

Harka found us when we had reentered the city, settling down in eir familiar thump. Minak was still chattering, excited.

“I, Minak, student of all! I, Minak, who all crafts know, who does building, dream, cry. The span to my city! You, Rain, run again amorn, library in!”

Harka bent to whisper in my ear. Rain was tired, I could see it, it wore on his face and how he walked. For once, I felt spoiled by the ease of my litter, even as I could hardly life an arm without sweating. “Fun or misery, then?” e asked.

“The report I always give you: I’m beginning to understand.”

“Worth the long walk?”

“Mukon is a character. Glad to have met em. Does e live there? E does not come into the city?”



“Savory, to, for em. Nymph is hard, a hard sight. No fault. But e, I, unwelcome. Kingship esteem, but...”

“Ah,” I smiled. “A dissident.”

“Ka! All we are. No, not bender, far own way. Won’t clip those claws.”



Seen on the dam murals:

A tengmu surrounded by eir component species: hummingbird, eagle, parrot, crow, magpie, each interlocked in a sort of ring. The hummingbird bursts from the parrot’s deliriously open mouth; the hummingbird blends into the crow’s tail; the crow is caught in the eagle’s talons; the eagle high-gazedly follows the comet trail of the magpie’s colors; the magpie bites the parrot’s tailfeathers. The tengmu that emerges is distinguishable from the basal crow by being colored both primary-blue and brown in a sort of tigerstripe pattern; the callsigns for the ultraviolet of natural blues, and the henna streaks favored by roans. Basal crows are painted as pure black; likewise with nymphs.





A crowd of nymphs coalesced in the shape of a storm cloud. Twisted shapes, tessellated with no gaps, lightning stemming from their eyes and splayed beaks. Fire picked up wherever the lightning struck, fire with ivy and daisies and human hands twining around each flame. So much fire, on these walls - did it symbolize speech? And in each burst of flame was a different city - distinctly, not burning, but rather rising from the flames, generated by them. One a clump of Heathling skyscrapers, one the vine-buildings of Quay complete with dam overshadowing them, other more abstract vistas I didn't recognize. One that was only basalt pillars, one that was only interlocked rectangles. And plains beneath the cloud, drenched by rain, covered with eggs.

Burning basil; sunflowers with shriveled petals and heads heavy with sharp seeds; red rosehips; acacia leaves autumning from green until turning into tongues of flame. Above a field filled with these plants, an orca flying through an off-blue sky, chased by a pack of happy jackal puppies. The bright natural sun framing all of them like a rainbow, multicolored gems of stars hung up in the sky as it darkened at the higher portions. A long white line behind all of this. A parade of elephants, giraffes, shoebills, sanguinelles, green jays, gharials, moose, fat cherubic pigs.





A herd of smoky horses laid over each other like ghosts,  
far ahead of the rest of the crowd,

Two lanterns with open windows - one holding a white star,  
one holding a glowing white stick. A red rope between the  
lanterns' handles. A hammer leaning on one; a honey wand  
against the other. Each lantern ten times the height of the  
swarm of individual tengmu figures surrounding them in  
scenes of hewing and forging, pulling glass panes from  
kilns, hoisting steel beams to construct them, polishing  
their sides and weaving that connecting cord.

A red tengmu flying through the legs of herons, tall and  
cerulean, striding through a shallow lotus pool. Three  
eyes, three wings, three talons, a long quetzal's tail. A  
round bell in eir beak, talons carrying a lantern, an arrow,  
a bead of jade. I asked Harka, which of the animals on the  
walls were present here, lived amongst Savannah? E did  
not know, but suspected all of them, somewhere. Except  
for the horses.



"God," Kali claimed, over our dinner of hard bread, olives  
and berries, and cured veal thick with fat, "is life. Affec-  
tation, stolen eaten bred in from distant lords, no? But





clear. Blood impulse deep and simple, bloody above all impulse. Of all but in none. Magic word ‘advancement’. The poem ‘death’. The struggle bite revelation, the mechanism that sees. What does sun see? It encodes. More aspect your ‘truth’ plain, but ka, a matter of priorities... Thing encoded, thing stemming, body of puzzle, cell-lek language. Sand formula.”

I sat with Kali as today’s dusk fell, on an outer balcony of the grave tree. The “sundown” was stark and blue, laid over the land like a pale ash. Dr. Savelyevna once opined that sunsets were what she missed most of Heath, that short flame of legend, the stretched color the sun took on when cut by the horizon. I don’t know how it would look to me, how much ultraviolet would be mixed in, would it be deep and ruddy? But here it was just a pale dead blue. Great crackling noises echoed from above like bolts of thunder as the breakers fired, and the spine quenched its light filament by filament. Night fell on Savannah with a distant rifle salute, a warden’s baton on the bars as he walked.

“And my affectation, from my home as well,” I conceded. “The physical work, the motions of the wheel, inextricable and waiting for us. Life by mines, the cloud of mines, the suffusing nobility of our company’s task... I won’t call it



oppressive. But it does underline the pace of life. Ah, you think to yourself, we deal in the cold and rigid geometrical blocks, the things that can be transmuted but cannot change, as life changes on its own terms. Development. My issue with Triaxian theology is the essentialism of life, the assignment to the life process of all things new and colorful. For flourishing is older than that.”

“Yes. And look at my city! The bricks, and the eyes to see them. Synthesis.”

I nodded.

The longer I spent here in person, the more the grave tree resembled Fisher Valley’s monolithic museum. No walkways here, but a similar height and spiraling structure. I could never reach the upper heights of it again if not by drone, so we made content, both wingless, with the first levels. But I wished Rain had had the chance for the view up there. In night the place glowed, many-colored flame shadows swaying over the interior branches. And it glowed in day, the cold sunlight pouring in through the leaves and gaps. Another approximation of true sunlight, that green gleam.





The rainbow list of graves. The leaping, flying, gliding, singing heaps of bone and gem. Rain hated it in here, I could tell the scale of it disturbed him in a way he was not ready to grapple with. He had to shy away, treating it superstitiously. But there was a romance in it to me. I hadn't yet dared to ask, ask what it meant beyond the obvious beautiful, personalized memorializing - but the living treated it as a commons space, chattering up and down the perches, visiting and tending certain lanterns, cleaning the smoke and meltwax out.

Outside: still-dripping nets full of fish carried from the central bay docks across to the residential boweries. Cases of recharged batteries from the great generator locks of the river-spanning dam, where the mural work portrayed a crow pulling a great black rope up from far beneath the soil, to the administrative towertree complex, and the foundry district. Dredges of clay carried from the marsh quarries to the kiln district, with by far the largest crews to handle their bulk.

The sound of tengmunnin in the city - barking orders, calling friends, laughing out a challenge, flecks of nymph-song. Human speech fizzled out in the air; tengmu speech cut right through it, and seemed to come from every cor-



ner of the city at once. A citizen could not only see the city spread out from above, but also heard it in the same way.

“Three days here,” I mused, “and the sense that I’ve rather spent years. I have been trying, since I arrived at the upper rooms, to cram so much into my mind, things that I can only see when they are behind me. Eat, eat, and ruminate later, but always eating with my eyes, indiscriminately. I don’t know what I was expecting, you know, I really, I really don’t any longer. I don’t know what I was thinking when we first came, the long journey here, any thoughts I had then are just drowned in their hopeless simplicity. Little ants we made. And now I am in a new flourishing world, fate has found me. I thought... did I think it would be simple? Or did I think it would be short?”

“Prepared by your working logic. Expected, you, when that ‘what’ was asked. Responsibility. Divination. Open ears, tricky eyes. No map, but you saw enough to fall the one in rubbing.”

“Maybe.”

“I thought,” e stirred, preened eir primaries, “where I? What world did dream in me? When you said Mukon today, ka, e will have talked seed. But me? A pure long dance,





maybe maybe, a shape in the sky. A type... a type of sound. I saw a motion, a grand space of color, twisted by my fingers, little spikes, in the wind. Perfect sight - unmolested presence - pure, pure, river clean pure. Life an open door into life, an in-moment gravity of art that I've rare seen replicated wakened. That was the draw? The say, all worth in your soul suffusing it. And then I broke myself and woke good, into this great work. This sad little town alight."

"How did you find it? This path? You flew dreaming out from the city, I... it was in what I saw. I understood parts, the... I'm sorry." I shrank into myself a bit.

"Youth, wreck. Rush heedless purity. Yourself fills your eyes; cry out echolocating. I was born in you saw those hutches, and flew from others' noise. Others' worlds pressing upon mind, knives and boons. Where was I to settle, in jagged tongue, in the works I could not know? And where, flightless, could I go but city again. Harka called us back, I could show you bones of who carried me. Where would take me, vulnerable, changed and shunned dust sour, pecked to death in play? They brought me here with other nymphs who hear a read, scry at the scribbles apage. Not original of my loves, not my first sense, so there I



was different too in the little-scholars. The old king taught us, blue Bara V, and I was called on for I did not take eir name. Couldn't fit in my mouth. A few years awake before e was gone, and there was no rising, only the continued path suggestions. Easy to immerse in, become, that same-hope, correct thought. Small story. Little road. And fire remaining."

I gazed at em in the myriad-dull light. What a little thing e still was, that stiffness in eir neck. Feathers still ragged, framed in the pale sun-glow with the wind dancing tiptoe through them. I spoke, watching eir eyes, "It is work. It is work. To be a perfect marble of yourself and then be made to build it back. What a demand, what a weight, from that social expectation and your truest heart at once. Such a clear image. Purity, freedom, Minak says that nymphhood e thinks of as a kind of preview of life, a skipping to the end, to the flames of heaven reaching back for you - but that it hurts you eyes to look at and follow, that past its time there is a recoiling. What was that realization for me? I don't know I've ever had it, that clear of a view."

E hopped around, turning from where we viewed the river to look up at the inner crest of the tree. "Aye, you're younger than me. Old roan me. Old seer, me. Gentleness:





hope searching new through your mind. What life in a burnt house? Maybe just me. Maybe cut deep, me. Who could know but I, and I blind and still, eating my books, turning my wheels, still. Safe passage.”

“Hmm...”

“Student, you needn’t eye eat more, you needn’t hunger this clarity. Stay, you said, until the catch.”

“Yes. I know we have time, but how much? Soon I must call back, peek my head through the door... I want a thesis to send back, a plot, something to insist upon and strike with. ‘You, outsiders, do this or you will be forever incompatible with the spirit here’ - what threat do I have but that? What negotiation? Even then I’ll stay here, I think, not delve again into those rooms, to be torn. Shark pit. No - I’ll stay until forced not to, or you decree otherwise.”

“And if my successor gives decrees for you?”

I knew what I promised. Was it possible, what? It would have to be possible. The spearpoint of the argument, make the crew of Cote bleed with the ability to make it happen. This was the only goal - all else could wait. “No. No, I’ll not see you dead before I. I will start there. My first demand.”





“Ka!” E trilled. “Oh, my sorry friend Emelry. They will to arrive now. Will you speak such eschaton to our now guests? Careful. They arrive - I say nothing, but give them what you mean to give.”

“So soon? It’s not yet evening.”

The spine darkened all at once, its vertebrae dimming in their luminaire sequence. Clack clack clack, several times a day, and hours of simulated sunrise skipped at once. Suddenly it was evening, that great tall switch thrown clack clack from a blue and sleepy green-golden hour to a quick bleary blue, and the shadow of the glider bearing down just on time.

I had seen this before. Those triangular wings, with the wire-mesh supports - I had seen them as walls of buildings in the kiln district, and repurposed into fishing berns up-river. A gray wedge of beaten metal and an inner kitelike skeleton, passing over the city like the specter of a giant falcon. It wheeled - slow, so slow, down in a yawning spiral to the airfield. To make that spiral a whole section of its left wing simply fell off, a controlled downing into the water. Before we’d even heard the splash, Ynewy was with us with eir guard.





So casual. “Kakaka, parliament,” e snickered. “Watcher li-  
uetenant! Meet, hi, oh and all the tales trueing.”

How was e so giant? E really was full my own size, and  
eir fellows much the same - none native to the city were  
built this way. Behind me, the glider made its last long arc  
down, trailed by a whole host of gawkers from Quay.

“Of little this court, now,” Kali preened. “How many miles?  
Look, us here, end to end pride.”

“And busy.” Ynewy said. “Busy beneath us, what will we  
say? We’ve supplies for a feast.”

Kali shook eir beak, “What can wait. Speech to do now!”

Ynewy scoffed, a dismissive diagonal nod. “No - here.”



“I’m still grasping,” I said. “The politics here. I am bound  
to think by politics. Culture here is already so distinct and  
separate, how are we to reconcile? Friend, where do we  
go, what do we say? This is what I want to know: the case  
to please. You trade, you collaborate, is there a consensus  
for a front?”





“The crow mind,” Ynewy intoned, “was built to be inter-  
faced with. Where, morphologically, we are hemmed in by  
our bodies far more than you are, subject to far more than  
you, our minds are tactile. We can change, cut through  
the haze of punishment and pride that chokes the human  
gears. This is not a concern. Listen: we know what we want.  
I know what Kali wants, and the gist of what brews in the  
third - though they? Happy anywhere. We all want differ-  
ent things, different lives. Is Savannah small or vast?”

“Vast in scale for a habitat, and in potential. Small and  
strained for a new world.”

“Yes. Walls. Walls and color, and charting. Listen: when  
you argue, it will not be about goals. Make it of states.  
Suggest no course of action. Nothing to be done. The only  
thing, beyond desire, that is needed: life, a fair yawn of life,  
and to go-away. To be on one's own. I ask this delicately,  
I know what you are. I see, already, that wall in your eyes.  
But we need to go away. There needs to be a separation.  
Is there an argument there? Species without star? Can it  
be made, begged and won? This case, priest, is it one you  
can be made?”

I sighed. “Not entirely. Look, true other-law from the Ecu-  
mene? It could be argued, by old rules of corporate state-





hood - present a founding field, a charter of service, a chosen industry. What could it be? Triactis existed at the birth of my species, in a neglected form. They, already prime and crucial suppliers of biospheres to Hightower, eugenetics to neotenes and themselves, already they were becoming indispensable. But the case could not be made for centuries of a true and enshrined corporate culture, not of size enough to change the law. And what do we have here? Ynewy, your project at the end, I've only heard whispers. What is it?"

"New rooms. We want the craft. Look, love Kali, but e is slow, and must be slow - must be of the pace of cities, ka. E is a king, specialty builder: I am a taker, a thief, vagabond. Kali: you want a new gift. But I want the one that is already mine, the mines of the rooms. Not a matter of trust but resources - carvings into the walls, to take and build that settlement, neglected by the room makers. They don't want it, they want to give it away, this gift-wrapped bone. So us, first clients, and who knows where we will go? It will be beyond my time," e said harshly, "but as the course stands, Quarry will bid Savannah. We'll buy the world."

"Right. Valley of steel and ceramic, and deep charter I'm sure. But what industry could you claim, in a space so



small and specific? None that exist now. It would have to be a new field - a governing body of lavendries, of the work of the mind, seize that hegemony from humanity and craft it better with your new brains? An argument could be made - but it would be such a commitment, such a cast die, focused on to exclusion. And, frankly speaking - refuge in uniqueness, would that not be the condition imposed by Coteshinoeleon's project more? That you must keep the bodies you depend on? No. I think it would be the expected argument, but too much another cage. It would win respect, perhaps, but a casual one, an unnoticed one. Savannah is not a company, not a project seeking approval and completeness - it is a world. So to treat this as a world - as the meeting of worlds - will it just be a hearing, a settling right there? No. No, no ledger. I want to call a war settlement."

"With what!" Ynewy chirped jubilantly, "With your one spider, a few stolen ones, or scrap from my scrap empire? Little one, ambitious, but please, what blade can draw blood? Beak, fingernail, ka, alright!"

"Wagered with this weight of bone. Where do we sit? What can we call this but a memorial? Kahaha, my crew, my leadership - the strictures of my role - keep priming me





to treat this as a previous case, a previous injustice. Like other habitats, ones I knew, where cruel architects cut up their own people; gathered people to be changed. Not so here. Not gathered, not a small failed experiment on the fringes. The heart is here, the road of things," I tapped a fist on litter ceramic, leaning over the railing. "The mandate of heaven will strike eyes on this land. Savannah was not a project, it was a war, a war against all your histories, a manufacture of death. A war by any definition; the deprivation of a people. Perhaps beyond what Cote and other founders anticipated, more than they know now - who knows what they know? So much have I talked with them, and only smug evasion, not even the fear of being discovered - as if perhaps some iniquity lived here, some silly failure of tribute or secrets of a second project - no, the guilt is widely dispersed and casual, utterly casual. The callousness of distant war, and its casualties here, this and three times so much. This is the argument I can make: that this is not a matter of a hearing, of restitution. That this demands the settlement of wars, as wars have always been settled: flower victor's synthesis. The last to first. There is only so separate as you could become from the Ecumene, so far outside of the beautiful burning shadow you could step. What we must do is seize it, transform it - demand it be made ours? Perhaps one group of researchers is re-



responsible for what happened here, but perhaps the entire cultural history was a conspiracy towards it since the Tri-actian charter.”

“Not since Lune was this done,” Kali said. “That our precedent, now. Hard sell, to take the seat, to draw again the lines.”

“Precedent indeed! The deluge was ruled a war, when the sky opened again and the old planet began tugging the leash. How could that be justified? To burn the sky, to leave an entire people so unmoored they lost the sun’s faith despite being so much closer to it? Not since Lune was this done: the stumble into a new species, without a safe and guiding hand, without the people’s own input. Bones withered. Necks broke. The lungs of infants dis-integrated. And the three Sees panicked, cast blame on the change that was necessary? A right was won there, the right of spiritual reformation after bodily reformation, the scrys that proved that homo aristes did not diverge from the line, but found a color waiting for them. Theirs was a natural shape, as enshrined, as inbuilt as baseline. You are the same. And to deny you will take the rites of war, which none could risk. Sue not for independence - but for peace. You are already living, and have the right of life. This over-





rides all concerns, theological and political. Triactis will bend to change for you, or risk the changing of the See.”

“Gambler,” Ynewy said. “Gambler, gambler, smashing rocks. What will the words of law do when a world can be made outside them? What will you bring to an end? You cannot hold onto it, you won’t promise well.”

“I can. The worst cannot happen. It - it is not allowable for it to happen. A world cannot be cut off! No human heart could look at this and say no, least of all the priests of the sun. For they, whose veins run with poetry, their hands are heavy for their tears. Of all people, they listen to the speaking.”

“How? Listened like the roomsmen listened? Where will they stand, speaking against us? They will rise and deflect, say, ‘this is not mine, this is not mine’, and if they disown, what then?”

“No. They teeter on blasphemy in the best of times. The line is drawn here - I speak as a priest, as a devotee, of those who have danced in the sun. And for the hidens - punishment. A legendary glory of creation, heaped honors for their role - and utter punishment. This is the next decades of my life. I will see the hammer ring.”





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“Managing?” Harka asked, peeking worriedly at me. “I can dive the anchor.”

“No, it’s alright.” I fastened the rubber shackle to my leg. The stake I was anchored at hadn’t moved, was still stable. “Help me with the harness, though?”

E obliged. With deft claws and beak e sat behind me and tightened the straps holding the breathing apparatus to my body, eir face brushing against mine when the goggles came on. “I don’t know how,” e said, “I don’t know you drown. Down there, in the murk...”

“Harka, it really is fine. It’s the best. Everywhere, everywhere here, this puts me the most at home. I can finally drift after a long day, I know it all is safe.”

“Safe and eaten by salamanders! Dark, dark.”

I laughed at that, so clear-voiced it surprised even me, fogging up the goggles slightly. I slid into the water feet first, the surface rippling in the shale-green light of evenings here - the blue of the spine lights, the yellow and red of the skyland. Harka fluttered and joined me, floating like





a duck all folded up in the water next to where I treaded myself afloat. Over the dam, the city lights had come on, and we watched them play through the leaves of the buildings. E told me of the errands e had run today, the berry shops, running orders and letters between royal offices. The Likin performance e, Minak and Rain had attended, Minak joining the flight segments in eir excitement. But Harka asked me nothing about my meeting. Ynewy stayed in town - we'd have time to speak of it - but for now, Harka kept shooting glances at my face, to see if I was ready to yet. I was not.

That night - after e had gone, after the spine had echoed twice with my eyes closed, before sleep found me in the warm water - a buzz reached me. A deep mosquito whirr swung too close. I kicked myself upright, pushed my goggles to my slick forehead, and saw a black shape over the water leaving a glossy indentation in the surface beneath it where it passed. I knew what this was.

It screamed over, but by the time it reached me I'd already hoisted myself onto my litter, ready to pull into shore. It wasn't a bird. No visitor. A fat locust of a drone, small and quick, battered and black, like no craft I'd seen before. No





sleek ceramic of Hightower-built things, no workman's filigree of my own littermakers. This was a Kuryo toy.

She perched it far from me, on a dead branch sticking out from the water like a sauropod neck. A second component clicked out, a yet smaller speaker-drone glided over and attached to my railing.

"Turned faithless now, hm?" it crackled out, her voice behind the low-quality distortion. "Bet you didn't want to hear do soon. Bet you thought it was quiet down here. You idiot."

"Ah, a scolding. What do you need? I must sleep."

She sighed a small incredulous laugh. "Scolding. What the hell do I have to say to you? You left a storm behind you, you don't want news?"

"No. I did not blackout on whim."

"Sure. Well, everyone's upset. You ruined the audit, Sainshand. Staff pulled the hostility card first, and now its all useless, the work is useless. What's gonna happen now? How fast can you be moving blind?"

"Kuryo, do you not see how I stand?"





“Ha! You can’t stand down here, girl, or walk, or fly.”

“Do you not see that I’ve already abandoned the audit? That mission is over. I know you for a liar, and have no reason to listen. Look, why are you here? What are you chasing me for? You are not my equal in skill, and have no power with this proximity. I know where I am going! Play, play up there as you will like, all there are players in the game of softer Savannah. How much time we have wasted!” How did she do this to me? How did she make me so loud and wild? I was done guessing, done! “What will you represent to me? The same stagnation? My crew is above your shallow tricks, they will be, and you have nothing to tell me of the game. The reckoning will come, I will bring it back with me. If you have love for the separated ones here, speak by them! Tell me plainly or leave back to your stalling. It is time to work, Redname, it is time for the true work of the damned thing.”

The machine was quiet for a long time. The bulk of it swayed on that distant dead branch, the green light from the water playing upon the chassis.

“What did the two leaders say? When you met with them, just now. I’ve never been allowed close. It’s all dark for



me, and Flechetteir's people hate me more than, hahaha, yours."

Something was defeated in me, all at once I lost my anger. "Deferring all the policy," I said carelessly. "Talk of reformation, you'd be sympathetic. I am, I've been swayed. This place demands that scale. A second step of things - from Heath to sun and wheel, no? And now from that, our old new world, into a third space. The details will wait, we will beg an audience with the See, the seat of the monarch Themself. Ynewy says we are beyond bureaucracy, must speak at the heart level, must make a plea. A demand."

"You're just going to beg. You're just gonna show neck and ask to be let go. You'll walk up and give them a list of reasons why you can't fit into what they are, and ask them to change. The princes of the world. The life takers. The seat of power. The blood-weighters. Wall builders. You're going to beg?"

"Is it because you sought refuge in Triactis that you cannot fit in your head what a civilization is? How have you been so scarred by the law and yet believe it does not truly exist? You can only call us warbands for you are from one, you scorn the throne because you see fire there and no light. Please! Blood-weighter? Wall-builder? These are in-





sults to you - keeping ledgers, and loving security? What would you have?" Oh, my anger was back, "How would you live? To keep scrabbling in the dark, to refuse the answer already proven true, and eat worms forever?"

"Tell me what you'll do if it doesn't work," she pressed. Her voice unperturbed but urgent, as if straining for the last scraps of limited time. She needed to make me say something. "If you just get rejected. Flat out. If you're left in the dark like I was. If they just kill all of you, unwilling to allow the steps outside of the human outline they decreed, if they just fucking kill the whole thing! Don't you know the line? Didn't you see that, under the tree? It's in the heart of this place. You'll be seen as betrayers, in the lineage of betrayers, yes. Cote is already calling you an apostate, planting the seeds."

"Ah, seeds, seeds. Nonsense. Outweighed. The fire is too strong. This is not a transgression any longer. This is a new deluge, a world in itself. Savannah already stands too tall, commands too much dignity. Nothing can be invisible here, when I am done, nothing will be invisible. Tell that to whoever you speak for."

"You didn't answer me. Tell me now, what will you do if it fails? When the hammer comes."



“I won’t answer that. I won’t entertain it in my heart, not your gaming-out of a violence that does not exist. Reading from the poisoned history books you grew up with, no. No. I’ve no fear of the true story.”

“And me?”

“What of you?”

“Look me in the eyes. You can’t. Actually can’t, but if you could, you wouldn’t. What happens to me when you beg?”

“Oh, you’ll slink off again. You’ll be -”

“No!” she screeched. “Tell me! If you, if you tear down the pillars, huh! If you strike back, and make your case, and win everything! Fine! You’ll throw me in with the ringleaders. You’ll burn their writing. And will you do it to me? Will you make the call, line me up, cut my hand off? Are you going to cut my hand off?”

I was silent.

“You will! You will!” Her voice faltered on the edge of a panicked sob, but she sniffed it back in hard, spoke like stone. “You’ll do it. You sit here, preaching to me of oh





the golden age, and you'll cut my fucking hand off. I can see it. In front of everyone, you'll do it, you'll do it yourself, you will take the knife you love so much! Your golden beam! You servant for butchers! Admit it!"

She panted. I could only stay silent. I could only stare.

Her remote voice crackled, the fervor gone. "You'd better pray. You're young. You think. Do you know what your job is? Your only job, if you want to do any part of this right? You keep everyone alive. Fuck everything else, you keep the land alive. Nothing dies. Nothing dies. Find me when you start worrying. This stifling fucking city. Talking like an expert and you haven't seen anything."

The speaker hopped up, back to the main drone as it was already taking off again. And before I could respond, she was away, that pin like body disappearing into the settling night fog.





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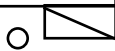


1) There are important dimensions to Down By The River that require it to be understood in the context of the Heath Cycle, but most people still don't know that exists. Can you briefly explain the Heath Cycle and DBTR's place in it?

DBTR is one of five or six stories making up the Heath Cycle, a planned series of novels roughly split between a modern half and a far future half. DBTR is the first entry in the latter segment. All take place in the world of Heath, at different points in the history of the Ecumene - the Ecumene functioning as a backdrop that ties each story together, builds on a set of assumptions that more individual stories can stem from.

Each story is about a unique kind of contact with spirituality, in a world where spirit is a living and concrete thing. Heath is an alternate history sticking relatively close to our own, but one in which minor land deities exist and are entire fields of study in university. Where footage has been taken from heaven and hell, communication channels established. A setting that's able to literalize and unite topics of faith and society, while still feeling normal, not fantastical, familiar but with more things in it. What does a

***DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY/ AMARA REYES INTERVIEW***



normal life look like in a world like that, and how does a broader and very specific social order develop through it?

The first half of the Cycle is largely about that first question, focusing on more intimate, character driven dreamy stories, while the second half jumps into the other question and gets to be higher-level civilizational. The first half lets us see how the Ecumene operates in times like our own, but from a distance - everyday lives, old stories, very rare brushes with the bureaucracy. But the second half dives into it, unpacks the history of the first half, carries the half-seen structures there to their natural conclusions. I think how I handle protagonists is also a big part of the Cycle's character. I like playing with roles that seem ominous and blatant at first - inquisitors and ravens, sacrificial shrine maidens, deranged eugenicist nobles - and then have that be a relatively mundane government job with little danger involved, unique rather than sinister, something you actually have to treat as work. It's a fakeout, but it remains part of who they are - that persistent reminder that in a different world these structures would have been turned to different ends, ran as sour as they promise. But with Heath, there gets to be more of a blank-slate exploration of what these are, what they signify, and the eye-level experience of the people who make lives there.



notes



2) In what sense is DBTR, and the Heath Cycle more generally, meant to be read as utopian? Tonally it is far more so than most of the works in *Holohaus* but as in Ada Palmer's *Terra Ignota*, there is a mixture of elements contemporary readers are likely to view as both utopian and dystopian.

Heath can't be a nightmare or a paradise, but it is defined by being a better world than Earth. Better, in a way still plausible as real, living, and complicated in all the ways human society has to be. It's the question of a different feedback loop taking hold in human nature. In all cases except the playing around with far future space stuff, I want to keep Heath's sense of alternate history as close to ours as possible, wherever possible, with one caveat: it's a place where genocide has never happened.

It's not that Heath is totally absent of evil, it's that the world is structured strongly enough that it can never plausibly blow through enough barriers to bite bone. Murder, rape, political complication, hatred and conquest, all these must exist on Heath - but they also have never been enshrined by the law. The nature of the world has never wholly bent around them, and there's a scale, a domination they could never reach. The idea of war itself is fundamentally different; there is an ocean of blood at the bot-



tom of Earth that simply does not exist on Heath. This may create a more naive society, but also a bolder one, a more limited one but a safer one as well; healthier, and quieter.

That's necessary - I want the ability to discuss human nature, its pitfalls and weaknesses and ugly impenetrable sides - but without the inevitable end to that question being utter violence and the very worst thing thrusting its head into the discussion. That's what I want to steep in and explore most, kind of what Kuryo's character is about - someone used to a much more Earth way of life trying to parse wider Heath, always waiting for that killing logic to reveal itself, but it never happening. And still she gets to be clearheaded and smart in a way the rest of the cast is foreign to, see a real possibility that no one else has any conscious defenses against..

3) How do your own religious views reflect and inform the vision of Heath? Or is that a fair question to ask in the first place?

My worldview inevitably centers on religion, its totally fair. Christianity and communism, intertwined with little distinction between them, has been the foundation of all my convictions for as long as I can remember having convictions. Every question I've asked the world has led





back here. A lot of ideologies are true in that they describe something real and say something important; many others are complete in that they give a full account of the world and how every level of it operates; this is the only thing I've found that is both true and complete. The lineage of Romero and Ellacuria is the thing in this world my heart can still believe in most, its fundamental to who I am, every sense I have.

So how do I approach the standard Tolkein subcreation anxiety, how do I rewrite the world? A ton of Heath is me just complaining to God like hey idiot why didn't you give us the neutral world instead of the bad one huh, I hate being in the bad world ugh. But I don't even really think our reality is particularly grotesque, at least not inherently. It really is just that assassination works. Of people's spirits before they can find themselves and how to live, of their lives when any voice gets too bright and true. That kind of killing has ruled the world of thousands of years, the strongest force in how the world's direction changes, and still slaughter-suppression impulse can never win, only delay.

Heath in a large part is about the question of what if it had been better - not just now or an inevitable someday, but





always. Since the beginning, what if we hadn't disappointed quite as much? Heath's permanent religious institution - an inevitable shared conclusion every culture arrives at - is built towards a vision of a God who speaks to us more, who leaves enough traces behind to just be a fact instead of a matter of meticulously-triangulated faith, who continues the project of humanity at much closer intervals. A garden which we outgrew but still retained rather than being expelled from, a tower that was correct in what it hoped for and was allowed to stand, a flood delayed to the end of history rather than beginning it. A Christ for every people and every era - Majesties, Sons-Of-Heaven. A more explicitly guided history - a God with a much heavier hand - a much more limited set of possibilities - less fatal mistakes, less dizzying freedom, and less raw murder.

4) How does your vision of a worldwide unified religious Ecumene respond to the contemporary associations of any such hegemonic order with colonialism, or the breakdown of liberal globalization's attempt at a peaceful world integration?

Oh, I don't think there's ever been any attempt. What peace has there ever been, what unity? Tools of the same fascist structure borrowing the words. All worldly power





has stemmed from or is constantly threatening to be captured by the eternal spirit of fascism, the worship of pain and death and the destruction of thought, the meat grinder. When on earth has there been an attempt at peace?

It's important that the founding of the Ecumene is situated where it is - 1500. I still take the conquista as a breaking point, the clearest moment where the blunt social-animal instinct of war rolled over into something deeper and became a true incarnation of the worst things we contain. Something died there, and an entire spirit of history was locked out of the world. Real human history is beautiful and strong, it will never stop reaching upwards, but its a heavy tide to walk against the embodiment of death.

So this is something that Heath never has. This moment, this sleepwalking into an incomprehensible war beyond war, murder beyond murder, is instead allowed to be a real conversation. A meeting of two worlds that swings for the fences in the other direction, births a messiah, and saves the world forever. And it's the opposite problem, a healthier history that that awful current is always struggling to be born into, always dogs the footsteps of. The errors of the Ecuemene are boiling points of conflict with that, over-



corrections and suddenly-exposed blind spots - DBTR is a long story about how one of those holes is patched again.

5) In today's political and technological debates, God and the creation or transformation of life and consciousness are often opposed; on the other hand, there is a tendency among those who want to develop and extend life to claim they are creating or solving the problem of God. Do you see a path between these extremes?

This just feels silly to me, these discussions always feel like dramatic speeches from 50s sci-fi. It always feels like it disrespects the scale of God, boils him down to someone who makes funny robots and limited little social puzzleboxes. This world is one that's constantly transforming, that has exponential transformation built into its logic; the scale of truly divine creation is so vast that it's just laughable that it could even be approximated. If God had a perfect plan for the world then the time in which that could live is gone beyond the memory of memory, and calling God evil for making the world as he did betrays a shocking lack of imagination. Both views are just so reactionary and ironically waaay more prideful than anything they criticize. The world sucks and the world is beautiful and not knowing what happens next is scary, these are baseline human anx-





ieties that we've discussed enough that you don't have to freak out at realizing them for the first time.

6) Where would you place the literary influences of the Heath Cycle (they don't have to be conventionally literary) and how much do your influences and aesthetic goals vary between planned books?

Hieronym's *To The Stars* - still my favorite scifi work ever written, and also a *Madoka Magica* fanfic hahaha. The root of one of my favorite conceits in fiction, what I'll call the "organizational romance", a revolutionary or at least transformative bureaucracy and the minutiae of how its power functions, and how that dates back to the passions of the people most involved in it. The MSY is a perfect case study in what the scale and ambitions of world government would have to be, the best and hardest-edged side of the impulses that can produce one, and without it I wouldn't have been able to write the *Ecumene* with half as much nuance.

Dylan Bajda's *Serina: A Natural History of the World of Birds*, a speculative evolution project that's been running for ten years strong and 310 million years. The *tengmunin* can trace their conceptual lineage directly back to the fork-tailed babbling jay, and I've stolen the name "Serina"



for the Heath protagonist character I'm most fond of. I have an outright spiritual esteem for this project, it's informed so much of how I think about the complexity of animal life, the scale of ecosystems, even what being a person means. Rigorously plausibly, ridiculously fun, establishes the idea of life as something to play with and get lost in, without losing sight of its incomprehensible weight. What is an animal? A greedy little flesh automaton snuffling uselessly around? No, every animal, every species, is an encoded key of experience, a new set of incentives and concerns that transforms the world around itself. Every species is an emergent philosophy, a new language of love and death, a total recontextualization of the universe. Read it enough, and that's what Serina posits, portraits, and proves.

Early shoujo, dear god, early and all of shoujo really. From the heartrending breakthrough of Year 24, the surprisingly radical view of gender from Marginal to Kaze to Ki no Uta, the torrid tragedy of girlhood and impossible dream of liberating androgyny. It's a sensibility I want to bake into my heart forever. Manga as an institution has still not produced an equal to Glass Mask, nor anything so cutting as Utena. And, on the less grandiose side, shoujo is the natural home of what I'd call the "neighborhood story", another specific microgenre I love, comparable to "fam-





ily chronicle”; the following of a group of kids growing into adults in the same place. The slow transformations of friend groups, this tender and incredibly specific sense of self-discovery: Cat House, Taiyou no Ie, Sangatsu no Lion, Hourou Musuko, even Skip and Loafer and Punpun. When I tell smaller-scale stories than DBTR, more intimate ones, this is the feeling I’m trying to hit..

7) Tell us about worldbuilding. It’s become a somewhat maligned concept in SF & fantasy, associated with “lore” pedantry and the obsessive systematizing of authors like Brandon Sanderson, or even the simulationism of “open world gaming”. The publishing industry seems to be polarized between these modes of “worldbuilding” and a softer, more character-driven approach for more progressive and literary works, with some notable exceptions. But meanwhile “worldbuilding” on the internet has taken on a new life decoupled from narrative altogether.

I’ll start this by continuing from last question, with two more crucially important influences: the Orion’s Arm project, and SCP. These are one side of what I think of when I hear “worldbuilding”. Both are explicitly encyclopedic, multiple-author works with thousands and thousands of pages, and end up being big and diverse enough



that the pedantry disappears. It gives way to this freedom to constantly build your own image of the continuity as you explore and find the hidden gems that speak to you most directly (probably most relevantly for me, qntm's There is No Antimemetics Division and Darren Ryding's Yes Jolonah There is a Hell, which I guess do rhyme as well as their titles do), but are inevitably informed by the whole mass. The bones of how I think about hard scifi all come from OA (also where I get e/em/eir pronouns from, their wonderful system of the six natural human sexes), and SCP is a perfect paragon of the "organizational romance" you also see in TTS, so again, all very important foundations of my sensibilities.

Another side to it is just personal daydreaming. World-building as something you play around with, adding and removing things from, like painting. You give yourself a big canvas, a whole world's worth of space, and think about little points you want in it - plot conceits, institutional fixtures, place vibes, character types, whatever notes you want to hit. As you work out each of these more they spread out, start meeting and blending with other things you included, until everything's kind of in conversation with the rest and starting to take a coherent shape. That's how I think about it most when dealing with Heath, this





constant simmering brainstorm with a few guiderails, giving myself the freedom to rearrange any of it.

The dates and structure can come after and is just windowdressing, and I do like things a bit organized and color-coded haha, but I don't know! I appreciate "raw" world-building a lot even just as interesting articles as windows into a wider thing, suggesting the shape of the world they belong to, the appeal of scanning through a wiki of something you've taken an interest in. I think I like the "wiki experience" of some things better than the actual narrative behind them, which can end up falling flat when it doesn't seem to actually care for all the cool things it suggests.

8) You write in an old form, and often an older-fashioned idiom, about a world steeped in a sense of long-term tradition and thinking, but you are clearly engaged with new technology as a medium for literature and artistic experimentation. How do you see the relation between old and new forms of literature evolving?

Honestly, isn't purple prose so often just mangled nonsense? Like half the time I see it it's way too posturing and fake-spiritual, awps at one-off medieval conventions that don't fit and semi-remembered scraps of Shakespeare and funny Reddit caveman speak. It's so ugly haha, just





reeks of not understanding why anything is done. So I have a bit of a chip on my shoulder, I like doing it in a way that sounds right, and it's so much fun to get lost in! Gets me playing with tangents of meter in the middle of prose, grasping for creative little twists of grammar, especially with Emerly. Half the old idiom is just Emerly's personality, how persnickety she is, plus trying to establish Ilian itself as oddly old-fashioned and "reverted" compared to other spheres.

9) Are you watching contemporary developments in Artificial Intelligence as a literary phenomenon, a phenomenon like the emergence of the tengmu, both, or neither? (optional - any of these are technically but bracketing this one for discourse reasons)

Literary for sure, I definitely haven't been convinced to take AGI seriously within my lifetime. If I'm wrong then hell yeah, sound the trumpets; I also can't take seriously the "ohhh it'd kill us all aaah scary shoggoth" sentiment. Just neither way seems like anything to lose sleep over.

I've played with ChatGPT a bit, mostly in trying to use it as a conversation partner to discuss ideas with and poke holes in how I think, point me towards things I haven't considered but my thoughts definitely imply. Have also





dipped toes a little bit into image generation, but really, in both cases, it seems a matter of getting out of it a little less than you put in, and having to put in a hell of a lot. GPT is at the moment absolutely crippled by safeguards anyway, literally refuses to work and kneecaps itself at any whiff of a difficult topic - very hard to use. I think I'll love it when it can get a bit more fluent and personalized, it has a lot of potential, but even then the value for me will be in concept work and clarifying my own process to myself than anything generative or transformative.

10. What other projects do you have besides the Heath Cycle? Where will we be able to keep up with them?

Not much! An permanent on-and-off relationship with poetry; one more focused longform project, and trying to get practice in in the meantime. But all my fiction is being poured into Heath for now. Catch me on Twitter or [aksijaha.neocities.org](https://www.aksijaha.neocities.org), which I desperately need to set up still hahaha. I'll be throwing up a general roadmap of Heath, maybe an author bio, a few poetry samples I'm actually proud of - check it out!

11. If you could get a real publisher where would you most want to go? Answer as if they're reading!



I have no idea! I'm shy. Anywhere that will give me a ruthless and engaged editor I can respect. Real publication is a nice bonus but I haven't thought about it too much, I just assume it's something that'll fall into place once I'm ready for it. I feel like I have way too much work to do before then!

12. Where would you place yourself in the culture and gender schemas of Heath?

Gold female, 100%. No further comment

13. Do you have a kokoro wish?

I want to be a perfect tool. I want to be a named sword that chooses its wielder. I want to translate a force I allow to work through me; I want to shine in my beloved sword-master's terrible hand. I want to be an oracle - a fire bird - a treasure spirit - a true talisman.





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him off the meds - Dr. Mark'eg - on the other hand, she might have a fairly mundane malpractice investigation on her hands. It wasn't what she had been looking for but she could be motivated enough by conscience if it was something she stumbled into directly, if she didn't have to weigh it against all the other vast statistical clouds of conscience-reasons. As soon as she pulled herself out of the thickening crystal of early evening light, the kind that was too otherworldly to just sit in, she looked for the name within the years that matched Luskonneg's fragmentary recollection on Winter City's Educational Intervention roll.

It wasn't there. Had he given her a fake name? Or was his memory even less reliable than she'd assumed?

There were so many strange details to this story, another voice was whispering in her hear *if this wasn't what you're looking for, what is?* Punkin had been her first proof that reality was rotting out from under everyone's feet, like the creaking shrine at the Southeast corner of Yn Dahh't she'd percolated so many of her ideas while volunteering to maintain. This would be the second.

The strangest wouldn't come for three days. Her email to Romarosa had bounced back from an Ecclesiastic inter-





ception address. The kind you got if you tried to, say, message a wanted Dark materials distributor without having opened an investigation through proper channels.

When Gallvren asked about it at dinner - she'd had to tell her, they'd planned a bit of the approach together - she lied and pretended they hadn't even had the interview yet.

Three days later, for the first time in her life, Marzanna Et-nexheyr received her Ecclesiastical Asset Activation Slip in the mailbox, printed on thin red washi paper folded with the Inquisitorial Seal.

The boards had cracked entirely, the liquid night was beneath, and she had no idea where she was.





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